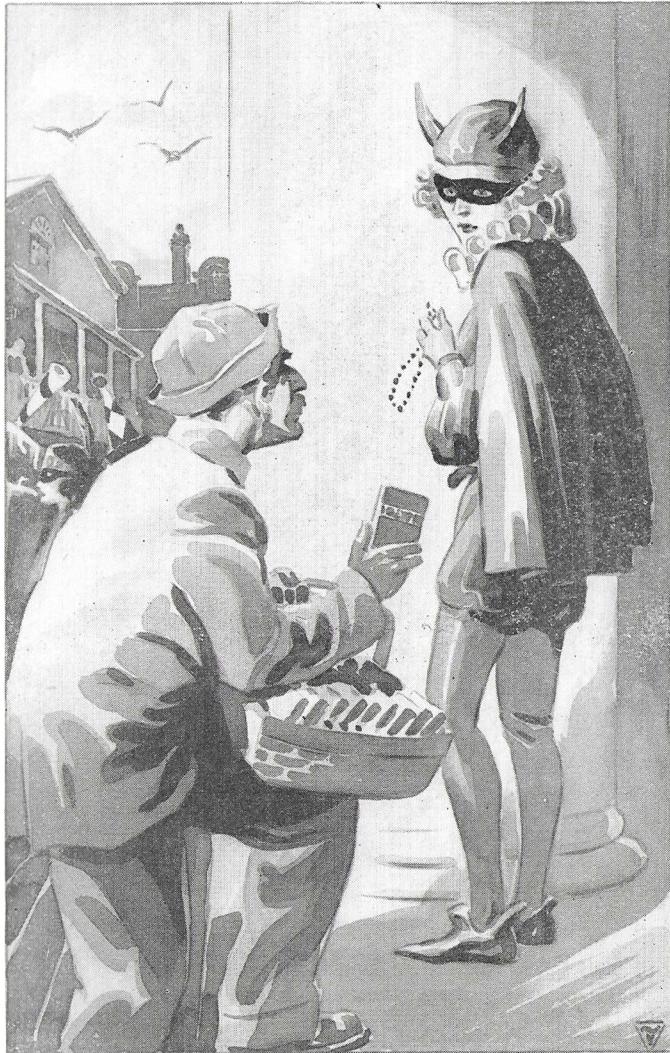


# **THE SHADOW STONE**

**MILDRED A. WIRT**



HERE IS YOUR IDENTIFICATION. YOU KNOW YOUR  
ORDERS FROM THE CHIEF.

"The Shadow Stone"

(See Page 10)

# The Shadow Stone

BY

MILDRED A. WIRT

*Author of*

THE TWIN RING MYSTERY  
THE CLUE AT CROOKED LANE  
THE HOLLOW WALL MYSTERY

*ILLUSTRATED*



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THE SHADOW STONE

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# THE SHADOW STONE

## CHAPTER I

### A BOX OF CANDY

CAROL SCOTT, an old blue corduroy bathrobe wrapped snugly about her slender figure, moved swiftly down the dim hallway to rap firmly on the door of her brother's bedroom. Somewhere in the house an electric clock chimed the hour of seven.

"Wake up, Jack!" she called. "Time to dress."

From beyond the closed door issued a faint groan, then silence. Carol knocked again, impatiently.

"Jack, you old lazy, get up or I'll drag you out by your toes! I'll never forgive you if we miss the parade!"

This time she heard a reluctant stirring from within and another groan more anguished than the first. A sleepy voice demanded crossly:

"Say, what's the idea, trying to get a fellow up in the middle of the night? There's plenty of time."

"Jack Scott, breakfast is almost ready now. Please—"

"Oh, all right," her brother grumbled, "but I can't

see any sense in getting so stirred up about an old Mardi Gras."

Carol stood at the doorway a moment, listening. Satisfied that Jack actually was obeying the summons, she darted back to her own room to finish dressing. Her blue eyes danced with excitement as she paused to regard herself in the long mirror of the vanity dresser. Carol at fourteen was a tall, pretty girl with flaxen hair and a creamy complexion marred only by a sprinkling of tiny freckles on the bridge of her straight little nose. Usually, she was not deeply concerned with her appearance, but this morning it interested her because she intended to alter it.

From the lower bureau drawer, she removed a cardboard box and beneath the mass of tissue paper uncovered a red imp costume. After admiring it fully she quickly donned the disguise and drew on the accompanying red hood from which projected two horns. Adjusting the mask, she strutted back and forth in front of the mirror, flipping her long red tail about and thoroughly enjoying the sight.

Laughing in sheer delight, she ran down the hall to the spiral staircase. There, obeying a sudden impulse, she climbed astride the bannister, and with arms out wide shot down to the first floor, shrieking gaily as she descended. She struck the bannister post with a thud, landing fairly in the arms of startled Aunt

Becky, the plump, colored cook who had come to the foot of the stairs to announce breakfast.

"Sakes alive, chile!" she exclaimed. "I ain't see you do dat since you was six yeahs old. And heah you is, a young womans, scootin' down dat bannistah like a fiahman. What fo' you got on dat funny riggin'?"

"Why, Aunt Becky! This is the day of the Mardi Gras carnival! Everyone in New Orleans will be celebrating!"

"Suah, I knows, honey, but it done slipped mah mind. I is gettin' old and no foolin'! Ten yeahs ago I was up with de chickens on dis' day, and now heah I is, fo'gettin' all about it—think o' dat, fo'gettin' Mardi Gras!"

"You're not getting old, Aunt Becky," Carol laughed. "You're just not fully awake yet. Tell me, how do you like my costume?"

"It fits you neat as a snake skin, Miss Carol. You is a cute piece, you suah is, honey! But breakfast is waitin' and even little red debils gits dem empty pains."

"Mine are coming on right now, Aunt Becky!"

Mr. and Mrs. Scott already were in their places at table when Carol entered the dining room. They smiled tolerantly as she removed her mask and slid into the chair near the window.

"I see you're prepared for the festivities," Mr. Scott commented.

"I'll miss the parade if Jack doesn't hurry and get up! Mother, see if you can't make him move a little faster. He's being slow just to plague me."

"I think Jack is coming now," Mrs. Scott smiled. "You must not be so impatient, Carol. The parade will not start for hours."

"But the streets will be crowded with masqueraders and there will be so much excitement," Carol protested. "I can't bear to miss a minute of the fun."

By the time Aunt Becky brought in a steaming plate of crisp brown waffles, Jack sauntered into the dining room. He was a tall lad for his fifteen years, with brown hair and eyes like his father. He enjoyed teasing his younger sister and felt vastly superior to her in worldly wisdom. This particular morning he eyed her red costume with undisguised distaste, but politely greeted his parents before airing his grievance.

"Look here, Mother," he began in the tone of one who long had suffered, "when I promised I'd take Sis today, I didn't know she would tog herself out in a silly get-up like that! If she wants to trapse all over New Orleans ringing bells and acting juvenile, why can't she go by herself?"

"We'll not go into that again, son," Mrs. Scott replied firmly. "You know I couldn't allow her to go unchaperoned. There will be many rough persons on the

streets—a young girl might be subjected to unpleasant encounters."

"Mardi Gras is silly," Jack muttered.

"You didn't think so last year when you wore a costume and took part in the festivities!" Carol retorted coldly. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd prefer to go alone because in your present mood, you'll be like a nice wet blanket!"

"We'll not discuss the matter further," Mr. Scott said sternly. "Jack, you're to escort your sister, and I trust that you'll enter into the spirit of the day and not ruin her pleasure."

"Yes, sir," Jack replied, avoiding his sister's triumphant gaze.

Breakfast over he took as long as he dared in preparing to leave the house. But when he and Carol finally were on the street mingling with the holiday crowd, his black mood melted rapidly away. He had only pretended that he did not care to see the parade.

Canal street was densely thronged with people. They met groups of girls in ballet costumes, boys wearing grotesque animal masks, a horde of pirates, an odd assortment of clowns, gypsies and story-book characters. There were any number of red imps abroad too but Carol saw no costume which was identical with her own.

"Isn't it fun, Jack?" she demanded eagerly, skipping along beside him. "If only you wouldn't look so glum."

Although Carol had lived in New Orleans her entire life, it seemed to her that this was the first time she had really appreciated the color and romance of the annual Mardi Gras festivities. Shop windows were gay with flags and bunting; the street resounded with laughter. Her eyes feasted upon the sights.

Far away a band was playing. Walking toward the music Carol and Jack soon found themselves in the old French quarter of the city. As they passed beneath old Creole houses with handsome balconies of wrought iron, parrots in cages hanging from upper windows, screamed down at them. They met in the narrow, cobbled streets many coarse looking men who frequented the Mississippi river docks and Carol was glad that her mother had insisted upon an escort.

"Let's get back to Canal street," Jack presently proposed. "It's nearly time for the parade."

The crowd had swollen to unruly proportions, but by dint of squeezing and pressing, they maneuvered into an open spot along the curbing. Not for long were they privileged to remain there. Twelve blue-coated policemen came riding abreast down the street, warning everyone back. Carol was buffeted and elbowed about. In trying to maintain her position, she

lost hold of Jack's hand. The crowd swept him several paces away.

Before they could rejoin each other, the parade was passing. Hearing the strains of the band, Carol stood a-tilttoe to see the leading float. It was the title car, a fairy-like mass of blue and white built of paper-mache. There were other floats, each more dazzling and beautiful than the first.

Then a hush went over the crowd as the throne-car bearing Rex, King of the Carnival, came into view. He was a fat, jovial looking ruler with wax mask, a dazzling crown of gold and a diamond scepter in his hand. He bowed and smiled at the crowd, and now and then singling out a person who struck his fancy, directed one of his velvet-clad pages to toss the fortunate individual a bag of sweetmeats or a string of cheap jewelry.

Carol pressed closer to the curbing. The throne car passed directly in front of her, and miracle of miracles, the eyes of the Carnival King came to rest upon her. Apparently, Rex found the Red Imp amusing, for he pointed his scepter toward her and one of the little pages tossed a string of glittering beads in her direction.

The trinket swirled through the air, dropping at Carol's feet. She reached down to snatch it up, but there were others equally determined to win the favor. In the wild scramble, Carol was rudely pushed and

shoved. She slipped and went sprawling on the pavement, but as she fell her hand grasped the string of beads. Someone aided her to her feet before she was trampled. She thanked the masked stranger and looked about for Jack. He was nowhere to be seen.

Triumphantly clutching the trinket, Carol watched the few remaining floats in the parade, and then as the crowd began to break up, decided to search for her brother.

"I suppose he's looking for me too," she thought.  
"Oh, dear, where could he have vanished?"

After wandering about aimlessly and catching no glimpse of Jack, it occurred to her that it might be well to station herself at some conspicuous place where she could be easily seen. She mounted the high stone steps of a public building and selecting a location beside a marble pillar, gazed down upon the milling crowd. In that vast sea of moving heads she could not distinguish her brother.

Waiting with growing impatience, Carol examined again the string of beads which had fallen into her possession. It was a cheap glass necklace yet she prized it because it would serve as a souvenir of the carnival.

Her attention presently was drawn to a vendor of candies who moved through the crowd toward the stone steps where she sat.

"Pralines! Pralines! New Orleans pralines!" he called, yet Carol noted that despite his cry, the man seemed strangely indifferent to the few prospective customers who gazed at his basket of wares. He was looking straight toward her, or so it seemed to Carol.

Without knowing exactly why she was interested, the girl studied the vendor curiously as he mounted the steps. He was a short, squat little man with a hooked nose and black, sharp eyes. He wore a clean white uniform which fit him very poorly.

"I don't believe he's a vendor at all," Carol reflected. "He's merely assumed that costume to mingle with the revelers."

She became conscious of the man's intense scrutiny and grew slightly uncomfortable. He had paused on the steps and was deliberately staring. She was very glad that her mask was in place.

The man startled her by abruptly moving toward the pillar where she stood.

"You are late," he accosted her crossly. "I have waited for you fifteen minutes."

Carol was so taken aback at the words that she was unable to make a response. Before she recovered from her astonishment the man drew from his pocket a small box. It was the familiar imitation cotton-bale container, usually filled with delicious pecan-covered

candies and sold in many New Orleans shops. Yet Carol noticed that the vendor had not selected one of the boxes which he carried in his basket.

If the action mystified her, the man's next speech left her thoroughly bewildered.

"I come directly from the House of the Peacock Shutters," he said in a low tone. "Here is your identification. You know your orders from the chief. Obey them to the letter."

He thrust the box of candy into Carol's hand, and before she could utter a word of protest, turned and vanished into the carnival crowd.

## CHAPTER II

### AN ODD MESSAGE

"THIS seems to be my lucky day," Carol thought, staring down at the unexpected gift. "First I win a string of beads and now a box of candy."

She watched the vendor as he walked swiftly away without once glancing backward. His action bewildered her. She was at a loss to understand why he had given her the box of candy unless in the spirit of a joke, yet his attitude had not been that of a carnival prankster.

The man's words had seemed very strange—she wondered what he could have meant by saying that he came directly from the House of the Peacock Shutters. Carol had never heard of such a place, although in the old French quarter of New Orleans there were many ancient houses which bore romantic names.

"And he said something about obeying the orders of the chief," Carol mused. "I suppose it was all part of the joke—yet it didn't sound that way."

Her first thought had been that the box was empty, but it was too heavy for that. She was in the act of

raising the lid to examine the contents when she felt someone grasp her arm.

Startled, Carol glanced up. She found herself accosted by a reveler in full mask who might have been her own twin. The newcomer, obviously a girl, wore a Red Imp costume identical with her own even to the loose-fitting hood which completely covered the face.

"Give me that box!" the masquerader commanded in a tense high-pitched voice. "It's mine."

Carol pulled away from the restraining hand, moving back a step. She did not like the girl's manner and certainly not the arrogant command.

"What do you mean?" she drawled. "Just how do you figure that this box of candy belongs to you?"

"I saw that man hand it to you just a minute ago," the girl replied tersely. "He made a mistake. That is, he mistook you for me. I was to have met him here on the steps and I was late."

"You say you had an appointment with the vendor?" Carol inquired carefully.

"Yes, that's how it was," the girl answered eagerly. "He was to deliver the—the candy to me at this hour. The mix-up occurred because your costume is exactly like mine."

"An amusing coincidence," Carol commented dryly. "I must confess that my curiosity is aroused. Tell me,

who is the chief, and where is this mysterious house with the Peacock Shutters?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the other returned coldly, a note of alarm in her voice. "Are you going to give me that box of candy?"

"Not until you answer a few questions. Your story doesn't sound plausible. I suspect you saw that man give me the candy and decided you would like to have it yourself."

"Oh, you are stupid! Give me that box instantly or I'll take it by force!"

Angrily, the girl made a dive toward Carol, but the latter anticipating the move, kept the candy beyond reach. A number of persons paused to watch the encounter. Carol did not wish to participate in a scene, yet she was unwilling to give up the candy merely because the other girl demanded it.

She tried to walk away only to find her path blocked. The other girl, thoroughly angry and excited, tried to jerk the box from her. Carol put forth all her strength and succeeded in holding her own.

A small crowd circled about the pair, laughing at their struggles and calling out goodnatured jibes.

"Here, here, what's wrong?" a gruff voice demanded.

A blue-coated policeman came hurrying toward the girls. Instantly, they moved apart, Carol still in pos-

session of the box. Her opponent after casting a frightened glance in the direction of the approaching officer, turned and fled.

"What's going on here?" the policeman asked Carol as he hurried up.

"Why, nothing at all, sir," she responded meekly. "We were having a little argument over a box of candy. Nothing of consequence. That girl who ran away when she saw you coming tried to take it from me."

"The candy belonged to you?"

"Why, yes, it had been given to me only a moment before."

The policeman nodded, and quickly dispersing the crowd which had gathered, paid no further attention to Carol save to warn her to avoid unpleasant contacts with rough characters. Cheeks flaming beneath her mask, she scuttled hurriedly away.

Carol was glad that her brother had not witnessed the humiliating scene. The quarrel had not been of her making. She had merely stood up for her own rights. Yet Jack would be certain to twit her about it should he learn what had occurred.

Carol glanced quickly up and down the street. There was no sign of her brother, but she caught a glimpse of the girl in the red imp suit. The latter had paused in her flight and was looking back.

"Such a silly, unnecessary fuss," Carol thought. "If

she had asked me for the candy in a polite way I might have given it to her. I wonder if it really could have been intended for her instead of me?"

Now that she reflected upon it, the entire scene seemed unreal. The vendor's actions had been mystifying, actually bordering upon the melodramatic. Then too, the girl in the red imp suit had appeared truly distressed over her inability to gain possession of the box of candy.

"And she's still watching me," Carol observed. "It's plain enough that she's terrified of that policeman, but if he ever moves away, she intends to return and cause more trouble."

Having no desire to become involved in another encounter, Carol melted into the crowd, at the first corner turning down a narrow side street leading toward the old French Quarter. She scarcely noticed the direction she had taken, so intent was she upon her thoughts.

She kept thinking of the girl in the red imp costume. How odd that they should have dressed alike! She realized now that the vendor easily might have mistaken her for the other. Yet the appointment—if there had been one—seemed fantastic.

"The entire affair is a puzzle," Carol reflected. "I wonder if the box really does contain candy?"

The street appeared fairly deserted. After glancing

back to make certain that she had not been followed, Carol sat down on a doorstep beneath an iron balcony, there to examine the contents of the mysterious box.

By this time she was beginning to believe that it really was a box of intrigue and mystery. It was something of a disappointment to lift the lid and discover that the conjecture had not been correct. The miniature cotton bale contained several layers of neatly packed pecan-covered pralines.

A trifle chagrined, Carol selected a piece at random and bit into it. The candy was stale and strong in flavor. With an exclamation of disgust, she tossed it away. She chose another piece but it was no better than the first.

"This miserable candy certainly wasn't worth an argument," she thought. "I can't imagine why that girl made such a disturbance over it."

She arose from the doorstep and tossed the box into the gutter. The lid fell away, scattering the candies into the street. Carol started to move on, then abruptly halted to stare down at the pavement. Her attention had been drawn to a bright, shiny object which apparently had fallen from the box of candy.

She stooped and picked up the tiny curio.

"What in the world—" she murmured.

It seemed to be an odd-shaped green stone no larger than a quarter with a tiny hole bored in the top, evi-

dently intended for the insertion of a ribbon or chain.

Carol turned the stone over in her hand, thinking that it must be a charm of some sort. She had never seen a more beautiful shade of translucent green. She wondered if it might not be jade.

The stone itself was irregular in shape and bore no carving save an inscription in letters too fine to be read without the aid of a magnifying glass.

"I begin to understand now why that girl was so excited over getting the box," Carol thought. "It really was intended for her. And she must have known that it contained this curio."

Although it was now clear that she had come into possession of a trinket intended for another, Carol felt more baffled than ever concerning the strange actions of the vendor. She could think of no logical reason why the man should give such a curious stone to the girl who later had accosted her, unless the two were involved in some peculiar deal together.

"I wonder if the stone really is jade and if it has any value?" she mused.

Directly across the street stood a pawnshop. It occurred to Carol that she might learn something about the trinket by showing it to the sharp-eyed, lean pawn-broker who could be seen moving about in his cage-like office.

Impulsively, she crossed the street and peered

through the dirty plate-glass window. The owner of the shop observed her standing there, and drew the corners of his mouth into a smirk as he waited for her to enter.

Carol was half tempted to walk on. But she found herself opening the door. A tiny bell tinkled as she stepped over the threshold.

The pawnbroker eyed her appraisingly, yet said no word until she had spoken.

"I—I have something here I should like to show you," Carol stammered. "I thought you might tell me if it has any value."

"First you must remove your mask, young lady. I deal with no person whose face is hidden."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I had forgotten that I was wearing a mask."

Carol removed the hood and then hesitantly proffered the small green stone. The pawnbroker stared at it an instant before picking it up from the counter.

"Is it jade?" Carol asked as the man studied the trinket without speaking.

He regarded her narrowly. "Yes, it is jade—a very poor quality. The color is inferior. Where did you get this stone, may I ask?"

"Why, I—that is—it was given to me," Carol stammered.

She knew that the pawnbroker was regarding her

suspiciously. Her answer had not been convincing. Yet if the stone was an inferior one, he surely could not think that she had stolen it.

"How much is the piece worth?" she asked hurriedly.

Again the pawnbroker studied the trinket, observing the finely carved inscription.

"I can offer you very little for it," he said indifferently. "Two dollars."

"In that case I'll keep it."

The pawnbroker seemed reluctant to return the stone. He kept turning it over in his hand.

"While the jade has no real value, the stone has a curious shape," he said slowly. "I might offer you a dollar or two more."

Carol shook her head. "No, I have decided to keep it. But I should like to have you tell me the meaning of the carved inscription."

"You seem to know very little about this stone," the man replied significantly. "You're sure that it actually belongs to you?"

"I told you it was given to me."

The pawnbroker shrugged. Ignoring Carol's outstretched hand, he picked up a magnifying glass from the counter and moving into a better light, studied the stone once more, holding it carefully between thumb and index finger.

Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation of surprise. Carol thought that something about the inscription had startled him, and then she saw that the pawnbroker was staring not at the stone but toward a patch of sunlight flooding into the shop. She too was amazed at the sight which she beheld.

Silhouetted in the shadow upon the floor, was the unmistakable image of a man's face.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SHADOW STONE

THE pawnbroker nervously relaxed his grip upon the curious green stone and it clattered to the floor. Instantly the silhouette of the face was obliterated.

Before the man could recover the trinket, Carol stooped quickly to pick it up. She tried to hide her excitement at the strange sight she had witnessed, but her hand trembled slightly as it closed over the jade stone.

"Did you see that?" the pawnbroker demanded in a subdued, half-frightened voice. "The jade piece cast its shadow on the floor—the shadow of a face."

"And is that so unusual?" Carol asked, striving for a casual, steady tone.

"Is it unusual? You know little of gems to ask such a question. Never in all my experience have I witnessed such a thing!"

Carol did not trust herself to reply. Instead she raised the trinket to the light and after holding it in several positions found that she too could produce the amazing shadow outline. When cast upon the opposite shop wall it appeared grotesquely large. The clear-cut

profile was plainly recognizable as a man's face yet bore no resemblance to any known personage.

"How do you explain the shadow?" she asked.

"It is beyond my comprehension," the pawnbroker answered. "Never would I have believed such a thing possible had I not witnessed it with my own eyes. It seems almost supernatural."

Carol ran her finger over the uneven surface of the stone, deciding that its rough character must be responsible for the unusual image, since the piece itself did not resemble a face.

"I suppose it's what one might call a freak-of-nature stone," she commented thoughtfully.

"The jade may have been cut, but if so the work is most expertly done," the pawnbroker said.

"Then I take it that this bit of jade has more value than you thought when you first examined it."

"As to its value I would not venture to say," the pawnbroker returned in an odd tone. "How did the stone come into your hands?"

Carol saw that the man was regarding her with a look of undisguised suspicion.

"I told you it was given to me."

"By whom may I ask?"

Carol was tempted to decline to answer. Instead she replied reluctantly:

"The stone was given to me by a street vendor only

a few minutes ago. I found it hidden in a box of candy."

The pawnbroker smiled a smile which was not pleasant to behold. It told Carol that he did not believe a word.

"That is the absolute truth," she maintained.

The shopkeeper continued to regard Carol with an intense scrutiny. Annoyed by the cold stare, she turned to leave. Immediately his manner altered.

"Just a minute please," he interposed. "If you will wait here I may be able to tell you more about your jade piece."

He walked swiftly toward a rear room, glancing back over his shoulder at Carol.

"Do not leave until I return," he warned. Then he closed the door firmly after him, an action which told Carol that all was not well.

"I believe he means to call the police," she thought.  
"He must think I stole that jade stone!"

In panic she fled to the outside door. The bell tinkled loudly as she went out into the street. As she hurried away the irate pawnbroker came running after her.

"Wait!" he shouted angrily. "Come back or I'll call the police."

Carol pretended not to hear and quickened her step. While she had no reason to fear questioning from

the authorities, she felt that they too might consider her story fantastic.

She turned at the first corner, working deeper into the Quarter. Fearing that the pawnbroker might attempt to follow, she then slipped into a narrow alley-like thoroughfare which ran between rows of aged, decaying brick and plaster houses, the facades of which were set flush with the sidewalk.

Carol had never visited this particular section of the French Quarter before, and at a less pressing moment would have enjoyed pausing to admire the once-elegant dwellings which like their former occupants had suffered with the passage of time. Now many of them were deserted, shops utilized the lower floors of others, and in only a few did descendants of the proud old Creole families still reside.

Carol was about to emerge upon another street when she suddenly halted in alarm.

At the entrance of the street stood two familiar figures—the girl in the red imp suit and the vendor who had given Carol the box of candy. They had their backs turned and were engaged in earnest conversation.

"I know she disappeared somewhere in the block," the girl declared. "I saw her head this direction, but when I ran across the street to hail you, I lost track of her."

"We'll find her if we comb every house in the city!" the vendor returned grimly.

Carol dodged into the nearest doorway and flattened herself against it. She knew the pair were searching for her and she meant to hear their conversation before returning the shadow stone.

"It was a stupid mistake to make," she heard the girl say irritably.

"How was I to know another girl would wear a costume exactly like yours?" the vendor demanded gruffly. "She was standing there on the steps waiting for someone. Anyone would have made the same mistake."

"You'll have a hard time explaining that to the chief, Jake. Results are all that count with him, and by losing the stone you've bungled everything. How can I face that old lady without it? I may be a smooth talker but I'll not risk going to see her without the jade piece."

"We'll get it back," the vendor replied grimly. "If you saw the girl turn down this street she can't have gone far."

"I'll wait here while you circle the block," his companion suggested.

The vendor nodded and walked rapidly away. Carol hoped that the girl too would move from her post but she remained where her companion had left

her. Now and then she glanced down the street, making it dangerous for Carol to linger in the doorway. Yet if she tried to retrace her steps the girl was almost certain to see her.

From the conversation she had overheard, Carol was certain that she had come into possession of a valuable trinket which had not been intended for her. It was far from her nature to wish to keep anything which belonged to another, yet the words of the pair had filled her with misgiving. She was inclined to suspect that the two were involved in some underhanded plot and she did not wish to aid them by giving up the mysterious shadow stone.

"That bit of jade has more than an ordinary significance," she mused. "I should like to keep it long enough to learn why its recovery is so vital to them."

Carol waited hopefully for an opportunity to slip unnoticed from the doorway, but minutes elapsed and still the girl in the imp suit did not move from her position. Then presently, from the opposite end of the short little street, Carol heard heavy footsteps.

Peering cautiously forth, she saw that the vendor had rounded the block in his futile search, and was entering the narrow street to rejoin his companion. He would be certain to pass directly in front of the doorway where she was hiding. Carol knew that her

costume would give her away instantly. She was trapped.

In panic she tried to think of some way out of the predicament. Flight was impossible for the vendor's companion guarded the other exit to the street.

Carol flattened herself closer to the massive door. For the first time she noticed a heavy iron knocker directly above the level of her head. She reached up and let it fall against the door plate with a sharp, metallic thud.

She waited. Inside the old house she could hear a soft shuffling of feet as if someone approached very slowly. If only the person would hurry!

Carol was amazed when a tiny door cut in the paneling of the larger one swung back on its hinges. An elderly colored woman in neat white cap and starched apron peered through the aperture at the girl.

"What you want?" she inquired.

"Let me inside and I'll explain," Carol urged in a low tone. "But do open the door quickly or it will be too late!"

## CHAPTER IV

### COURT OF THE TWO SISTERS

THE colored woman hesitated and then obediently swung open the door. Carol stepped in over the high sill, barely in time to avoid being observed by the vendor who rapidly approached the building. He passed hurriedly on without glancing to right or left.

Carol found herself standing in a long immaculately scrubbed flagstone passage. The moldy old walls were of faded blue plaster, patched and cracked and peeled, but through an arched doorway she caught an inviting glimpse of a sunlit courtyard with pots of bright flowers and tall palm trees.

"What bring you to dis house, Red Imp?" the colored woman inquired. "Dis de place of the Mercier sisters."

Carol apologetically removed her hood. The colored servant looked slightly relieved that the uninvited visitor was so youthful.

"I shouldn't have intruded, I know," Carol said. "I wanted to avoid meeting someone who was passing on the street. I hope you will permit me to stand here in the passage for a moment until the man has gone."

The old servant's withered face wrinkled into worried folds. " 'Deed Miss, ah don't mind how long you stays heah but Miss Seenia an' Miss Sonia—dey's suah to be vexed if dey finds a stranger in de house. Especially when dey is expectin' a powe'ful important visitor."

"Of course I don't wish to make trouble for you. I'll go at once."

Carol opened the upper window-like panel of the door to peer cautiously down the street. As she feared, the vendor had paused at the corner and was talking with his companion. The instant she left the house they would be almost certain to recognize her.

It occurred to her that the pair had never seen her save in mask and costume. By removing the red suit she might pass them without being regarded suspiciously. Fortunately, she had donned street garments beneath the disguise. To the startled dismay of the colored woman, Carol wriggled out of the imp suit, chuckling as she wadded it into an inconspicuous roll.

"There! Now I can go in safety. I'm very grateful for—"

She did not finish. From the direction of the courtyard a high-pitched, irritated voice called:

"Magnolia, why do you delay at the door? Has our niece arrived?"

Before the colored woman could reply, a stout white-

haired old lady in rustling black silk came slowly down the passageway toward Carol. She walked with the aid of a cane which tapped a loud tattoo on the blue flagstones.

"Miss Seenia!" the Negro woman protested, hastening to offer her mistress assistance. The old lady waved her aside, saying peevishly:

"I am quite capable of walking by myself, Magnolia!"

Her manner softened as she peered with watery blue eyes at the embarrassed Carol.

"I must apologize for entering your house in this rude manner," the girl began, but the old lady interrupted.

"What did you say? I'm a mite hard of hearing." Before Carol could repeat, she added in a tremulous tone: "Of course you are Angela, our niece. Let me look at you, dear child."

Carol was subjected to an intense scrutiny. Then the old lady kissed her tenderly upon the forehead and her dim eyes filled with tears.

"You do not resemble my dear brother, Henri. No, doubtlessly you favor your mother, but for all that you are a Mercier and the last of our proud line."

"I owe you an apology," Carol began again, but for the second time the old lady interrupted.

"No, it is I who should apologize. Sister Sonia and

I have neglected you all these long years. We are so happy now that you have come to make your home with us. I should have gone to the station with Sonia to welcome you to New Orleans, but I am a feeble old invalid now. I seldom leave the house."

"I fear you've made a mistake," Carol said in distress. She glanced despairingly at Magnolia, but the latter had no intention of contributing to the explanation. "You see, I am not your niece."

Miss Seenia nodded brightly. She had not understood a single word.

"How impolite of me to keep you standing here when I know you must be worn out from your long journey," she murmured. "Do come into the courtyard. Magnolia will look after your luggage."

"But I have none," Carol answered, moving closer that she might speak directly into the old lady's ear.

"No luggage? Oh, you are having it sent from the station. I see. But what has become of Sonia? Why is she not with you?"

"I have never even met her," Carol cried in desperation.

Even as she spoke there came the sound of a taxi cab at the door. A tall, thin woman of late middle age with iron gray hair and dark piercing eyes, alighted, and after paying the driver, entered the house with her own latch-key. She was too disturbed to

notice Carol who stood in the shadow of the wall.

"Seenia, I fear I have a great disappointment for you," she said wearily, addressing her sister in a loud tone. "My cab was delayed upon the way to the station. I arrived a few minutes late. Our niece was not there and it appears that at the last moment she changed her mind and did not take the train."

"Nonsense!" Seenia chuckled. "Have you no eyes? Angela, my sister, Sonia."

The younger woman turned cordially toward Carol only to stare in perplexity.

"It is all a mistake," Carol explained again. "I am not the girl you evidently are expecting. I have tried to make your sister understand."

"You are not Angela Mercier?"

"No, I live here in the city. My name is Carol Scott."

"Then why—?"

Miss Seenia's cane tapped impatiently on the flag-stone pavement. She was always annoyed when she could not hear a conversation.

"What *are* you two saying, Sonia?" she inquired in irritation. Then before her sister could reply, she moved slowly down the hall toward the courtyard.

Miss Sonia turned again to Carol, saying in perplexity:

"If you are not Angela Mercier what can have be-

come of her? I am unable to comprehend why she was not at the station."

"Perhaps she will arrive on a later train."

"That is possible. Should anything happen—I am afraid of the effect it might have upon Seenia. My sister is not well. The doctor has warned me that she must have no shock. Her heart is set upon this reunion with our niece Angela."

Miss Seenia had paused in the arched doorway opening into the courtyard. "Are you not coming?" she questioned.

"Yes, Seenia," her sister answered hurriedly.

Carol turned toward the door only to find Sonia's detaining hand upon her arm.

"Please—would it be too great a favor to ask you to stay for a few minutes. I fear it will be difficult to make my sister realize that you are not Angela. If you go now it will upset her dreadfully. The excitement might bring on another of her heart attacks."

"You want me to pretend that I actually am your niece?" Carol asked in amazement.

"Yes, only for a few hours at most. It will give me time to learn what has become of Angela and to explain the situation to Seenia."

"I am afraid I'll not fit the part very well," Carol answered dubiously. "If your sister questions me—"

"I'll try to forestall her," Sonia said quickly. "I'll help you all I can. This is a great deal to ask, I know, but my sister's health is so poor—"

"I'll do the best I can."

Sonia pressed the girl's hand gratefully, and taking her by the arm, led her toward the courtyard. As they stepped through the arched doorway, Carol found herself in a charming garden of palm-trees, bamboo and potted flowers. At the far end of the court a tiny fountain played and just behind it a narrow flight of stairs curved upward to the living quarters of the old house.

"I know you must be hungry after your long journey," Miss Seenia smiled, indicating a luncheon table which had been set up in the open near the fountain. "I thought it might be pleasant to lunch here since it is such a delightful day."

"Yes, indeed," Carol murmured, nodding her pretty head in agreement.

"First I will show our niece to her room," Sonia interposed. "Then we shall have our lunch after she has refreshed herself."

She led Carol to a winding wistaria-covered stairway which curved upward to the second floor. From the landing they entered a long antechamber opening into a square, old fashioned parlor, stiffly furnished in red brocade and carved mahogany. Carol's eye trav-

eled swiftly about the plain walls which were ornamented with massive family portraits.

"We have only a moment to talk," Sonia said, indicating that Carol was to sit opposite her by the fireplace. "I shall try to explain the situation as quickly as I can or my sister will be coming to learn why we delay. Possibly you already are familiar with the history of the Mercier family."

"Only in a general way," Carol admitted.

She recalled vaguely that the Mercier name had been associated with the early establishment of New Orleans. A proud old Creole family of pure French and Spanish blood, it had played its part in the romantic history of Louisiana and then withdrawn to itself, frowning upon the changing life of the growing community. The Mercier sisters, Sonia and Seenia, the last of their generation, had maintained their abode in the old home-stead, declining to take up quarters in the newer, more fashionable quarter of the city.

"Many stories have circulated regarding our family," Sonia said quietly. "Some legendary, some true. But there is one which has never been told outside the family. It concerns my brother Henri. He was always a dashing, headstrong youth and resembled his grandfather, a famous duelist."

The old lady's eyes roved to an imposing painting which hung above the square, rosewood piano.

"A likeness of Henri at the age of twenty," she explained. "Seenia will not expect you to recognize the other pictures. To go on with the story, our younger brother, Henri, married against my father's wishes. A bitter quarrel ensued, and in the end Henri and his bride went away, vowing that they would never enter the house again.

"When my brother left he took a valued possession belonging to my father—I will not trouble you with the details of that unless the need arises. At any rate, later in his life, Father relented and made every effort to communicate with Henri but my brother never forgave him for his former attitude. When my father died he made Seenia and me promise that if ever Henri should return home we would give him his rightful share of the Mercier fortune. Seenia took the trust very much to heart. She spent thousands of dollars trying to trace Henri. When we finally located him it was too late. Both he and his wife were dead."

"But your brother left a child?"

"Yes, a girl named Angela. However, we did not learn of that until recent months. Our niece has been living with a family in New Haven. Seenia was overjoyed when we succeeded in locating her. She wrote the girl several letters and ended by inviting her to make her future home with us. Angela, of course, bears the Mercier name and will be the last of the

line. It means everything to my sister to have the girl with us. Angela will inherit our own fortune as well as the share which belonged to her father."

"And do I understand that you wish me to impersonate this girl?" Carol asked.

"Only for an hour or two. When I failed to find Angela at the railroad station I dispatched a telegram to the people with whom she has been living. I should have an answer very shortly."

"Probably the girl was delayed and took a later train."

"That is very likely. I am certain Angela will arrive tomorrow at the latest, but it will be difficult to make Seenia understand. She has grown a trifle childish in recent years and as I said, this reunion means everything to her. If she learns that Angela has disappeared she will worry and fret."

"I am not sure that I could act the part."

"You will have no trouble. Angela was brought up in ignorance of her family background so Seenia will not expect you to be familiar with our history."

"But how can I remain here even for a day?" Carol murmured in perplexity. "My parents will worry if I do not return home."

"Could you remain for an hour?"

"Why, yes, I could stay that long."

"Then leave everything to me," Sonia declared in

satisfaction. "Directly after luncheon Seenia always takes a nap. When she goes to her room you will be free to leave. Surely by the time my sister awakens I shall have had word from New Haven."

"I'll play the part the best I can," Carol promised.

"Good! I shall be eternally grateful. And now, we must join Seenia before she becomes fretful over our delay."

They descended the iron stairway to the courtyard where the white-haired old lady awaited them. The table had been laid with pure white damask and heavy silver and decorated with gay flowers. Seenia presided at the coffee-pot, beaming happily at Carol. To the girl's intense relief, the old lady made little attempt at conversation, but seemed satisfied to feast her eyes and allow Sonia to direct the talk.

The luncheon progressed smoothly with Magnolia bringing in course upon course of delicious food. Carol felt the tranquil spirit of the old courtyard seeping into her blood. It seemed to her that she had slipped back into a past age, an age steeped in romantic tradition. She imagined that she actually was Angela Mercier. Then she was brought rudely back to reality as Seenia beckoned the colored servant and with her aid, arose from her chair at the table.

"My dear, if you will excuse me, I shall retire to my room," she said wearily. "I am very tired. After I

have slept we shall talk of your father and the future."

With Magnolia's help, the old lady slowly ascended the iron stairway, pausing at each landing to regain her breath. She smiled fondly down at Carol, then vanished through a doorway.

There was a moment of silence before Sonia said quietly:

"You were splendid, Miss Scott. I can never properly thank you for what you did."

"I did nothing," Carol returned soberly. "This visit has been a delightful experience. I only hope that the real Angela arrives soon so that your sister will not be subjected to worry or shock."

"I am certain she will come on the next train. You are free to go now if you wish, but I hope that you will visit us again some day."

"Indeed I shall," Carol said warmly.

Sonia escorted her down the long bleak hall to the door. Before she could open it, however, the knocker sounded. They were both startled.

"Perhaps it is Angela now," Sonia said tremulously.

With trembling hands she opened the door to face a uniformed boy from the telegraph office. Sonia signed for the wire and then seemed afraid to read the message.

"It is from the people in New Haven," she said. "I am sure it is an answer to my inquiry about Angela."

After a moment she ripped open the yellow envelope and scanned the brief message. Apologetically, she handed it to Carol.

"Do you mind reading it to me? I am as blind as a bat without my glasses."

Carol accepted the paper and then hesitated so long that Sonia inquired anxiously: "It is not bad news?"

"Not the best, I fear," Carol replied soberly. "The message is signed by a Mrs. John Gifford and reads:

"'Angela departed for New Orleans three days ago. Unable to understand her failure to arrive.'"

## CHAPTER V

### MARDI GRAS BALL

"Mrs. GIFFORD is the lady with whom my niece has been living," Sonia Mercier explained, reaching out to take the telegram from Carol's hand. "Dear me, what could have delayed Angela?"

"Possibly she missed a train," Carol suggested.

"No doubt that is what occurred," the other replied with forced confidence. "But I do wish she had wired. If anything should have happened to her enroute—"

Her words trailed off and she looked so troubled that Carol tried to say something reassuring. Yet she could not help feeling that Miss Sonia's fears might be well founded. It did seem strange that the Mercier girl had left New Haven three days earlier and had not arrived in New Orleans.

"If Angela fails to come on the next train I must explain matters to my sister," Sonia said. "It will not be easy."

"Don't hesitate to call upon me if I can be of any further aid."

"Thank you, my dear. You have been more than kind, but I would not think of imposing further upon

your good nature. I do hope that you will call upon us again and meet Angela when she arrives."

Carol uttered a polite response to the invitation, and a moment later took her leave. Few persons were loitering on the street. Both the vendor and his companion had disappeared.

Carol had walked several blocks before she remembered that she had left the red imp suit at the Mercier house. It was a rented costume and must be returned to the shop from which she had secured it. However, she did not wish to go back so soon after her departure.

"I'll return tomorrow," she thought. "The costume will give me an excellent excuse to learn if Angela really arrives."

The day had proven highly interesting for Carol with exciting events crowding themselves one upon another at a speed which had left her no time to think. Despite their quaint, old-world manners, she had liked both of the Mercier sisters and considered it a privilege to be entertained in their home. Miss Sonia's brief account of the family had intrigued her deeply, suggesting to her alert mind the possibility that a far more absorbing tale remained to be told. She looked forward to meeting Angela and hoped that it might be arranged.

The hour spent at the Court of the Two Sisters, for

this was the title which Carol had bestowed upon the house, had not caused her to forget the shadow stone and its strange associations. Now as she walked slowly toward her own home, she removed the curious trinket from her pocket and studied it again.

"I may have done wrong to keep it when I know it was never intended for me," she thought. "I'll talk the matter over with Mother and Dad, and if they think it advisable, I can place an advertisement in the paper tomorrow."

She smiled in recalling how incensed the pawn-broker had been when she had deserted his shop in such abrupt fashion. She was convinced that the stone was worth far more than he had offered for it, yet she judged that its value came not from the quality of the jade but from its unique ability to cast the shadow of a human face.

In the light of her recent adventures, everything pertaining to the Mardi Gras celebration seemed colorless by comparison. Carol no longer felt the slightest desire to mingle with the holiday crowd or participate in the street festivities. She quickened her pace and soon approached her own home. Jack was sitting on the front steps. He arose and came swiftly to meet her.

"Say, you gave me a big scare," he declared before she could speak. "What became of you anyhow?"

"That's just what I intended to ask," Carol smiled.  
"I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Mother's been wild for fear something happened  
to you—what was the idea of ducking out?"

"I'd say you were the one who did that. After we  
became separated I waited and waited. You must  
have climbed down a manhole."

"I was right there in the crowd every minute. You  
went away yourself, Carol Scott. You were up to  
something! I can tell by the way you act!"

Carol laughed. "I did leave Canal Street, but not  
until after I'd given up all hope of ever finding you  
again."

"Where did you go?" her brother persisted. "Come  
on, 'fess up."

Carol hesitated. She was a little afraid Jack would  
scoff at her adventure, yet the secret was too in-  
teresting to keep. She had to tell someone.

She rapidly recounted all that occurred and was not  
greatly surprised when her brother regarded her with  
slight distrust.

"That's a pretty tall yarn—especially the part about  
the shadow stone."

"I didn't expect you to believe it," Carol retorted.  
"It happens that I have the honest-to-goodness proof  
right here in my pocket, but you're such an old skeptic  
you wouldn't believe your own eyes!"

"I didn't say I doubted your story," Jack corrected hastily. "I said it was a pretty tall yarn. What do you mean—you have the proof? Not the stone?"

Carol nodded proudly and unable to resist the temptation of impressing her brother further, took the jade trinket from her pocket and held it up before his astonished eyes. She was not disappointed. His mouth actually dropped open and for a moment he was too amazed to do more than stare.

"I thought you said it made a shadow."

"It does."

Carol experimented with several positions and succeeded in throwing the silhouette on the wall of the house.

"Gosh!" Jack exclaimed in genuine awe. "I'd like to own that trick stone! I'll trade you my new tennis racquet for it."

"Oh, no you won't," Carol laughed. "I'm keeping this little stone, if I don't return it to the vendor."

"You lost your chance to do that."

"I can place an advertisement in tomorrow's paper. I'd have given it back right away only I couldn't help feeling the man was a crook. The girl too for that matter."

"Plenty of underworld characters operate on Mardi Gras day. That couple likely was working some sort of racket."

"Well, it didn't work with me, at any rate," Carol chuckled. "Oh, I wish I could read the inscription on the stone!"

Jack took the trinket from her and studied it.

"It looks like French," he said, "but the letters are so tiny one can't tell for certain. Better show it to someone who reads French."

"You do have a good idea now and then," Carol returned approvingly. "Perhaps you can tell me the location of the House of the Peacock Shutters."

"Never heard of the place."

"Dad may know about it," Carol said thoughtfully. "His real estate business takes him to quite a few out-of-the-way spots."

A few minutes later she went inside to show her mother the shadow stone and at five o'clock when her father came home from the office, likewise told him the story of her adventure. The subject provided the main topic of conversation at the dinner table, and even Aunt Becky listened with wide eyes as she moved quietly about removing plates. Carol was not a little thrilled that her parents were truly impressed with the tale.

"I wish that stone had never come into your possession," Mrs. Scott declared, looking worried. "I can't really blame you for keeping it considering the cir-

cumstance, but of course you must make every effort to return it to the rightful owner."

"That's just the point," Carol replied. "Who is the rightful owner? I'm not at all convinced that the vendor was an honest person."

"His actions were strange, to say the least," Mr. Scott agreed. "It may have been a Mardi Gras joke but it doesn't look that way to me. I'm afraid you've stumbled blindly into something, Carol."

"A mystery?" she inquired eagerly.

"Perhaps worse than that."

"Worse! A mystery would be splendid."

"Not a certain type of mystery," Mr. Scott returned grimly. "Only a silly person would involve himself with crooks. I think the best thing to do is to place an advertisement in tomorrow's paper. Then if the stone isn't claimed, I'll turn it over to the police."

"Perhaps if no one calls for it I could keep it," Carol said wistfully. "I'd like to own that stone."

"I'm sure you would," her father smiled. "However, I consider it wise to show it to the police."

Carol was silent for a moment and then she asked Mr. Scott if he had ever heard of a place called the House with the Peacock Shutters.

"No, I never did," he responded. "And if I were you I'd not go searching for the place. You experienced

a rather remarkable adventure today quite in keeping with Mardi Gras. But it's over now and you must turn your thoughts back to the hum-drum affairs of every day living."

"Your father is right," Mrs. Scott added. "You always were inclined to be imaginative and I fear you're making entirely too much of this matter."

Carol said no more regarding the shadow stone but that did not mean that she was able to discipline her thoughts. Nor could she resist the temptation of demonstrating the unique powers of the jade trinket to the superstitious Aunt Becky. After dinner she slipped into the kitchen, startling the old cook by flashing the silhouette on the wall.

"No good will come from keepin' dat wicked thing," Aunt Becky protested nervously. "It bring you nothin' but bad luck. You do as your father tell you and git rid of it quick. If you don't you're sure to get yourself into a heap of trouble."

Carol laughed, and dropping the offending stone into her pocket, deserted the cook's domain. The hall clock chimed seven-thirty. She glanced at it in dismay. How time had flown! She would be late for the Mardi Gras party at the Glenwood Country Club unless she hurried and dressed. Although few young persons attended the ball Carol looked forward to accompanying her parents, for the annual event was con-

sidered exclusive and it gave her an opportunity to wear her formal evening gown of rose-colored silk.

By making haste she was dressed and ready when Mr. and Mrs. Scott came downstairs at eight o'clock. Jack had declined to attend the party, preferring to remain at home with a book.

"We'll be back early," Mrs. Scott assured him, as they prepared to leave, "but don't sit up for us."

A half hour's drive carried the party to the door of the Glenwood Club. A footman admitted them to a brilliantly lighted reception room where the dancing already was in progress. Carol's gaze swept the throng of guests and she was a trifle disappointed to observe only three other persons her own age.

"Some of your young friends will drop in later during the evening, I'm sure," Mrs. Scott said cheerfully.

"It doesn't matter, Mother. I'll have a good time anyway."

Carol danced first with her father, then with the only young man at the party, an awkward youth who annoyed her exceedingly by stepping on her satin slippers. After that she had as partners two of her father's elderly golfing friends. Completely exhausted by the ordeal of attempting to follow their out-dated steps, she sought the privacy of the veranda. Presently her father joined her there.

"Not having much fun are you, Carol?"

"I thought there would be other young people here," she admitted.

"How about another turn with me?"

"Thanks Dad, but I know it would be a sacrifice on your part. Let's just sit here."

With a sigh of relief, Mr. Scott sank into the chair beside his daughter. He took out his cigar, and for a long while they sat together, neither speaking, watching the moon rise over the treetops.

After a time their solitude was broken by the arrival of a middle-aged man, bald-headed and immaculately dressed in evening clothes, who unaware of their presence, paced nervously up and down the veranda.

"He seems to have a pretty bad case of nerves," Carol observed in an undertone. "Do you know him, Dad?"

"Only by reputation. His name is Barry DeForest. He's supposed to be one of the city's most successful lawyers. Everyone says he's a queer sort."

"Married?" Carol asked curiously.

"No, a bachelor. He lives alone in an ancient but magnificent house not far from that place you visited today."

"The Court of the Two Sisters?" Carol asked in surprise.

"Yes, and come to think of it, I believe he's an old friend of the Mercier girls. At least he has helped them

look after their money for years—or so I've been told."

An unusual note in her father's voice led Carol to pursue the subject further.

"Has Mr. DeForest managed the Mercier fortune well, Dad?"

"Very well indeed—for himself. Or so his enemies say. Looking after the fortunes of widows, spinsters and orphans has always been DeForest's speciality."

"You mean he's actually taken money belonging to others?"

"See here, Carol, I shouldn't have said what I did. Actually, I don't know a thing about DeForest. He's well-to-do, belongs to the best clubs even if he seldom appears at them, and in general attends to his own business. It's true he has no friends and there have been rumors about some of his business dealings, but he's never been involved in the slightest scandal. If his fees have been outrageous, that's a private matter between himself and his clients."

Sensing that her father did not wish to talk about the man, Carol said no more. DeForest continued to pace slowly up and down the veranda. She watched him with more than casual interest.

Presently the orchestra struck up a familiar waltz and Mr. Scott hastily arose.

"I've promised your mother this one, Carol. I'll be back in a minute."

He vanished inside. After a time Carol arose to follow. As she moved toward the door a beam of light shone full upon her, and at exactly the same moment she met Barry DeForest face to face. He halted abruptly and to her astonishment stared as if he knew her.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a cultivated, slow drawl. "Aren't you Miss Scott?"

"Why, yes, I am."

"I have been hoping to meet you all evening," the attorney remarked in a flattering tone. "You see, your very charming mother told me of a curious stone which came into your possession today. It happens that jewels and odd stones are my hobby."

"I did find a queer stone," Carol acknowledged, a trifle unwillingly. "I didn't know that you were acquainted with Mother."

"I met her tonight for the first time."

Carol had no wish to continue the conversation. She was disturbed and dismayed that her mother had told this stranger so much.

"Shall we talk for a few minutes?" DeForest invited with a pleasant smile.

And without waiting for a response, he firmly steered Carol back toward the row of chairs which she had deserted.

## CHAPTER VI

### A NEWSPAPER WARNING

"I LEARN from your mother that you enjoyed a most exciting adventure during the Mardi Gras," Mr. DeForest began pleasantly when Carol accepted the chair which he offered. "You must tell me all about it."

"There's really very little to tell."

"Come, come, my dear, you are far too modest and shy. Of course you have a story to relate for it isn't every day that one finds a stone which casts a strange shadow."

The lawyer spoke in a casual, wheedling tone which made Carol feel ashamed that his request for information left her so cold and aloof. Her sole reason for resenting Mr. DeForest's interest in the shadow stone was that she had taken an immediate dislike to him and did not care to talk with him at all. However, since he already knew about the trinket, it seemed silly to refuse to speak of the matter.

"As I mentioned a moment ago, I am deeply interested in stones and gems," Mr. DeForest continued. "Especially the history and lore connected with them.

I find jade a particularly fascinating study. Incidentally, I have a rather unusual collection of it at my home which you might like to see sometime."

"Indeed I should," Carol said politely. "I think my stone must be jade. At least it's a beautiful shade of green."

"I could easily tell if I might examine it for a moment. I don't suppose you have the trinket with you?"

"No, I left it at home."

"As a rule, one doesn't go about carrying jade in his pocket," the lawyer smiled. "Tell me the size of this piece."

"Oh, about like a quarter I'd judge."

"And does it bear an inscription?"

"Yes, but I've not been able to decipher it."

"I might help you with that," Mr. DeForest offered. "I was just thinking—why don't you call at my home tomorrow to view my collection?"

"Perhaps I could," Carol answered slowly.

"Then shall we say at three o'clock? And bring your little trinket with you. I'll give you my opinion as to its value."

"That's very kind of you, I'm sure."

"Not at all, not at all. I shall await you at three o'clock. But you haven't told me yet how the stone came into your possession."

Carol did not enjoy being questioned so closely. Despite the lawyer's generosity in inviting her to view his collection of jade, she felt slightly annoyed at herself for accepting the offer.

Catching a glimpse of her parents in the doorway, she hastily arose.

"Dad and Mother are waiting for me, Mr. DeForest. They're ready to go home, I think. You must excuse me."

"But I'll see you tomorrow?"

Carol hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, at three."

Her departure across the veranda was almost flight. She was provoked that she had given a definite promise to call at the DeForest home although she acknowledged that there was no reason why she should take such an attitude. Many persons would consider themselves highly honored to be singled out for attention from such a distinguished gentleman. Carol reflected that she must have a perverse nature.

"After all, I can't expect to keep my possession of the shadow stone a secret," she thought. "Mr. DeForest's invitation offers me a wonderful opportunity to learn more about the trinket."

Mrs. Scott tucked her daughter's hand into her own.

"Are you having too good a time to go home, Carol? We're ready to leave anytime now, but we don't wish to interrupt an interesting conversation."

"I'm very glad to go," Carol replied instantly. "I was only talking to Mr. DeForest."

"You lost no time in meeting him," her father smiled.

"It wasn't my doing at all, Dad."

"Mr. DeForest is a well known lawyer, isn't he?"

Mrs. Scott inquired thoughtfully.

"Yes," Carol answered, eyeing her mother a trifle accusingly. "I assumed you two were old friends. Why did you tell him about my shadow stone?"

"Why did I tell him—Carol, I've never been introduced to that man in my life so it isn't likely we'd exchange confidences! I don't know what you're talking about."

"But Mr. DeForest told me he learned from you about the shadow stone. You must have talked with him. How otherwise could he hear of it?"

Mrs. Scott laughed softly. "Oh, now I remember I did speak of the matter to a close friend of mine, a Mrs. Jason. I recall that Mr. DeForest was sitting nearby, but I never imagined he was close enough to hear what we were saying. Or for that matter to care."

"Well, he heard the conversation all right. I hope you didn't tell Mrs. Jason how the stone came into my hands. You didn't explain about the vendor and the candy box?"

"No, certainly not. And I said nothing of your

visit at the home of the Mercier sisters. I merely told Mrs. Jason that you found a strange trinket during the Mardi Gras parade. I had no intention of betraying a confidence."

"Oh, you didn't, Mother. Mr. DeForest is altogether too prying. I'm glad I didn't answer his questions."

In the dressing room a few minutes later, Carol recounted the entire conversation to her mother, mentioning the invitation which she had accepted because she had been unable to think of a polite way to decline.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't go if you wish," Mrs. Scott declared. "As you say, it really is a splendid opportunity to view a fine jade collection. Even if Mr. DeForest did seem a bit inquisitive, we must remember that he has a reputation for being eccentric."

Carol donned her cloak and then was forced to wait while her mother chatted with a woman of her acquaintance. As the conversation ran on and on, she wandered slowly off, eventually finding herself at the foot of the stairway. She was standing there when Mr. DeForest, hat in hand, emerged from the vestibule.

"I think we have all had enough party for one evening," he said pleasantly, and then as an after thought. "By the way, here is my card which bears the address of my residence. You should have no trouble in finding it."

Carol thanked the lawyer and glanced at the card.

"You must live not far from the home of the Mercier sisters," she commented.

A surprised expression came over Mr. DeForest's face but he answered readily: "Only a few blocks distant. You are acquainted with them perhaps?"

"I have met them only once and that was today. They were quite disturbed because their niece had failed to arrive."

"If you will pardon me for saying so, Sonia and Seenia are always inclined to worry," Mr. DeForest smiled. "They are old friends as well as clients of mine."

"I imagine their niece came upon a later train," Carol replied slowly. "I don't suppose you heard."

The lawyer hesitated and then said briefly: "To my knowledge Miss Angela did not arrive today. I have no doubt she will come tomorrow."

Mr. DeForest seemed reluctant to discuss the matter, actually looking relieved when Mrs. Scott joined her daughter at the foot of the stairway. Carol presented him to her mother and the conversation became general. A few minutes later the Scotts left the clubhouse. As they drove away Carol saw the lawyer step into his own luxurious limousine which had drawn up to the front door.

It was a little before midnight when the Scott car turned into the driveway. The lower floor of the

house was dark but a light burned in Jack's bedroom. Carol was passing his door when he called her name.

"Sis, come here a minute."

Carol peered in, smiling at the disarray. Her brother was comfortably propped up in bed with pillows, while the floor in the immediate vicinity was littered with books, newspapers and discarded candy wrappers. A half-empty pitcher of lemonade stood on a nearby chair. Several apple cores, tossed carelessly aside, had missed the wastepaper basket.

"Apparently, you didn't starve to death while we were gone, Jack."

"I managed to have a pretty good time. I'll bet you wish you had stayed home too."

"Oh, I don't know. I met an interesting celebrity of the town and received an invitation to call at his home. He promised to show me his jade collection."

"If you had stayed right here, you might have learned something important about a particular piece of jade," Jack hinted mysteriously.

Carol regarded the boy alertly. She knew that he had called her into his room for the purpose of revealing information but she was sufficiently wise in the contrary ways of a brother to realize that any display of eagerness upon her part would be apt to arouse a negative attitude.

"I don't see how I could have learned about Mr.

DeForest's collection," she remarked innocently.

"Oh, I don't know anything about him," Jack responded impatiently. "I meant the shadow stone."

By this time Carol was fairly overcome with curiosity, but she forced herself to remain casual.

"I guess you couldn't have learned anything new about the shadow stone, Jack. You've had no opportunity."

"Oh, haven't I? Let me tell you, if you'd improve your mind with reading—"

"Trash such as this?" Carol laughed, picking up one of the books to examine the title.

"I meant the newspaper. Now if you'd interest yourself—"

"What have you found?" Carol interrupted, snatching up the front page of the evening paper. "Is there a story in here about the shadow stone?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Oh, Jack, I think you're mean!" Carol cried indignantly, forgetting her resolve to remain indifferent. "I told you all about my adventure today and this is the way you repay me!"

"I was only teasing, Sis. Here, I'll show you what I found. An advertisement. A personal meant for you."

Turning to the final sheet of the newspaper, the boy indicated an item which he had outlined with pencil.

Thoroughly mystified, Carol accepted the paper. The personal read:

"Attention Red Imp: Your identity is known. Return gem found in candy box to newspaper office within twelve hours or face prosecution. This will be your only warning."

Jack grinned at the look of dismay which came over his sister's face.

"You're a known criminal, all right," he chuckled wickedly, burrowing deep down into the covers. "If you want the advice of little brother, better get rid of that shadow stone before it lands you in jail!"

## CHAPTER VII

### MISS ANGELA'S ARRIVAL

CAROL read the newspaper item twice before paying the slightest heed to what her brother was saying.

"I don't like the tone of this advertisement," she declared, frowning. "Why, it's an outright threat."

"Of course it is."

"I had intended to run an ad of my own offering to return the shadow stone to its owner. But this item provokes me."

"I can see it does," Jack grinned. "Poor Carol, her crime has tracked her home!"

"Oh, you know very well I've done nothing wrong. Anyway, I suspect this warning is all bluff. In the first place that vendor and the girl had no opportunity to see me without my mask and I'm fairly certain I wasn't followed home. Furthermore, if they had known where I lived, isn't it logical they'd have communicated with me here instead of running this threatening ad?"

"Oh, very reasonable. You're building up a nice case for yourself. I take it that you mean to keep the shadow stone and let the chips fall where they may?"

"I don't know what I'll do, Jack. I certainly have no desire to keep property which isn't mine. But on the other hand, I'm not convinced I should return the stone to that vendor or the girl. They were a queer pair to say the least."

"It's your stone," Jack said with a shrug, "but if I were you I'd run right down to the newspaper office without wasting an hour."

"If I do that I can't show it to Mr. DeForest tomorrow."

Carol took the advertising sheet and carried it downstairs to show her parents. She found them in the kitchen, guiltily foraging in the icebox for a midnight snack.

Carol anticipated that her father would take an attitude similar to Jack's, but surprisingly, he too was insensed at the threatening tone of the item.

"There's something about this entire affair that I don't like, Carol," he remarked.

"Do you think I should take the stone to the newspaper office and turn it in?"

"Either there or to the police. I happen to be acquainted with the advertising manager of this paper and I might drop into his office tomorrow and see if I can learn anything about the person who placed this ad."

"That's probably the best way, Dad."

"Run on to bed now, dear, and don't worry," Mrs. Scott urged. "You've done nothing of which to be ashamed and have no reason to feel alarmed over this item. I'm sure you'll not be prosecuted."

"So am I," Carol laughed. "At least they'll have to find me first."

Mrs. Scott might have been surprised had she known the exact state of her young daughter's mind. Carol was not in the least disturbed over the thinly veiled warning. Actually, the advertisement had aroused a feeling of elation and deep excitement, for it tended to confirm her belief that the shadow stone guarded a mystery.

"I wish Dad wasn't so set upon turning the trinket over to the police," she thought, climbing the stairs to her room. "I'd like to keep it long enough to learn why that candy vendor and the girl in red set such store by it."

After undressing, Carol snapped off the electric light, opened a window and allowed the rich moonlight to flood into the room. Then, assailed by a sudden impulse, she took out the shadow stone to test its powers. In the dim light it cast an even more grotesque silhouette than when exposed to the bright beam of the sun.

Carol's hand closed tightly over the rough stone and immediately blotted out the face on the wall.

She opened her fingers again to make the image reappear.

"What fun I could have with this thing if only it were really mine!" she reflected.

Carol was sorely tempted to play a prank upon Aunt Becky that very night but thought better of the matter. With a sigh of regret she slipped the stone under her pillow.

"I'll sleep on it just for luck," she chuckled. "Perhaps if I wish hard enough, it will bring me a glorious adventure!"

Carol did not awaken until late the next morning and by the time she had dressed her father had been compelled to leave for the office. He had intended to take the jade trinket with him, but had not wished to awaken her to ask for it.

Carol puttered about the house attending to various duties. Time seemed to pass very slowly and for want of another occupation she decided to clean the store-room. Coming upon a stack of old newspapers, it occurred to her that possibly in the earlier days of the week Angela Mercier's name had been mentioned in the society columns.

After searching through a large pile, she was rewarded by finding a brief item to the effect that the Mercier girl was expected during Mardi Gras as a guest at the home of the Misses Seenia and Sonia

Mercier. Of far more interest was a lengthy feature story carried on the front page which gave a detailed historical account of the famous old French family. The reporter, fired by imagination, had pictured Angela as a beautiful, glamorous, modern cinderella, who after years of poverty and hardship, had been called home to claim her rightful fortune.

Carol clipped the two items and laid them away in a bureau drawer.

After luncheon she carefully dressed for the anticipated interview with Barry DeForest. Despite her early reluctance to accept the gentleman's invitation, she now looked forward to viewing his collection of jade and particularly to hearing his opinion of the shadow stone. Before leaving the house, she wrapped the trinket in tissue paper and placed it in her purse.

Turning into the narrow street which had been indicated on Mr. DeForest's card, Carol noticed by a clock in a jeweler's window that it was just three o'clock. She quickened her step and presently paused before an old but imposing building with tall, twisted columns. A flight of iron stairs led from the sidewalk to the entrance door well above the street level. Carol mounted and rang the bell.

After a brief wait, the door opened. A fat black girl in white apron and cap regarded her with frank suspicion.

"Well, what you want?" she demanded crossly.  
"Peddlers git no welcome at dis house."

Carol, slightly confused by such an unfriendly reception, answered coldly:

"This is the DeForest residence, I believe?"

"Yes mam, but we ain't buyin' no notions an' we don't want no toilet articles."

"Indeed? Well, it just happens that Mr. DeForest invited me to call at three o'clock. Of course if he doesn't care to see me—"

The hostile look vanished from the colored girl's face.

"You're Miss Scott?" she stammered.

"Yes, I am."

"I humbly begs yo' pardon, Miss. Mistah DeForest done gone away on business but he says tell Miss Scott she is to leave de gem fo' him in my caih."

Carol frowned in annoyance. "Oh, but I can't do that."

The black girl shrugged indifferently.

"Did Mr. DeForest say when he would return?" Carol inquired.

"He didn't say, Miss, but it won't do you no good to wait around. Take my warnin' and lay dat gem in de palm of my hand. Mistah DeForest ain't de kind to stand no foolin'."

"I prefer to call again," Carol replied, turning away.

The door slammed behind her.

Carol walked slowly down the street. She had no intention of returning to the house a second time for she felt that she had not been well received. She especially resented the manner of the maid and was glad that she had declined to leave the shadow stone in her possession.

Reflecting that she was in the vicinity of the Mercier home, Carol decided that it might be well to drop in for a few minutes if only to ask for the imp suit which she had left there. She felt confident she would be received with more cordiality than at the DeForest residence.

A short walk brought her to the ancient dwelling. She lifted the old fashion knocker and in a moment Magnolia hobbled to the door, beaming broadly as she recognized the visitor.

"Are the Misses Mercier at home?"

"'Deed dey is, Miss, and glad dey'll be to see you dis day. Miss Angela done arrived at last."

"I'm glad to hear that," Carol returned, entering the long hallway. "When did she come?"

"Not a half hour ago. Miss Seenia was suah upset too when she find Miss Angela ain't you, but she's quieted down now. Go right on up to de parlor."

"Thank you, Magnolia."

Carol made her way to the courtyard and thence

up the stairway to the second floor. As she paused on the landing for an instant to catch her breath, the voices of those who were talking in the living room reached her ears.

"Oh, dear," she heard Sonia Mercier say in a distressed tone, "your request, Angela, is so unexpected. Of course the property is rightfully yours, but my sister and I hoped that you might wish to remain here with us. Your letters led us to such a conclusion. We are two lonely old ladies—"

"I am sorry if you received such an impression," a high, shrill voice interrupted impatiently. "I could never live in New Orleans. I must return to New Haven as soon as the financial settlement is made. I do hope we can adjust everything within a day or two."

It was not so much the words as the tone of voice which startled Carol. Somewhere she had heard that voice before. She was certain of it. Suddenly she became convinced that the speaker was the same girl who had accosted her during the Mardi Gras parade.

"But that couldn't be!" she thought. "This girl must be Angela Mercier."

The door to the parlor stood ajar, but Carol was partially screened from those within by the heavy draperies. She moved slightly so that she might obtain a view of the little group.

A dark haired girl with angular features and a sharp, hard little face, sat opposite the Misses Mercier. She was dressed in a neat, modish blue traveling suit which somehow seemed out of keeping with her personality. The costume obviously had been chosen by one with excellent taste in clothing, yet a glance at Angela Mercier's stormy eyes and petulant mouth, created a doubt as to her breeding.

"That girl is just a little money grabber," Carol thought with shrewd insight. "She's here to make plenty of trouble for the Mercier sisters."

Now that she had viewed the newcomer Carol could not be certain that it was the same person who had accosted her upon the street. She had never seen the wearer of the red imp suit without a mask. The girl appeared about her own size and general build, and the voice sounded strangely familiar, yet one easily could be mistaken upon that point.

Carol hesitated in the doorway, debating whether or not to enter. In the event that the girl should prove to be the vendor's companion, she did not care to have her own identity known. She too had been protected by a mask, yet if she were forced to speak, her voice might offer the other girl a revealing clue. It would be wise to wait and listen.

Carol was destined for a second surprise. As her eye roved about the little group, it came to rest upon

a bald headed gentleman who sat in the shadow. She recognized Barry DeForest. He seemed to be watching the Misses Mercier intently as if mentally recording their every thought, yet he took no part in the general conversation.

"It seems to me there is no need to hurry matters," Sonia said slowly, addressing Angela. "After all, you have been here less than an hour. We will speak of the property settlement again after you have rested. If you like I will show you to your room."

The girl made no response but arose and followed Miss Sonia from the parlor. When the two were gone, Seenia drew her chair closer to that of the attorney.

"She doesn't look a bit like my brother Henri, and even if she is a Mercier, she has bad manners! I wish we had never invited her here!"

Barry DeForest smiled consolingly.

"You may recall, my dear Seenia, that from the very first I advised against seeking this girl."

"And how were you to know she would be like this? Her letters led us to believe that she was an entirely different sort of girl, a modest, home-loving type. We thought she would be a companion for us in our old age."

"Letters often prove deceiving."

"So it seems. This girl has no interest in the Mer-

ciers as a family. Even a few casual questions convinced me that she knows nothing of our brilliant ancestry. Her only interest is in the money."

"Obviously, she would never fit into the cultured tranquility of your home," DeForest replied flatteringly. "Yet her claim to the fortune is a just one and must be considered. My advice is to turn over the property to her without delay. I am prepared to draw up the papers this afternoon if you wish."

"You must talk with Sonia about that. She will decide what is to be done. Oh, dear, this entire affair is so upsetting! First, Angela failed to arrive at all, and then that other girl came—"

"What girl?" Barry DeForest asked.

"Oh, someone that Sonia brought here and introduced as Angela. She thought it might upset me because my niece had been delayed, but the mix-up was far more distressing. Sonia always treats me like a child!"

Not wishing to be compelled to listen to a conversation concerning herself, Carol entered the room. Miss Seenia uttered a gasp of astonishment, and then smiled a welcome.

"I must apologize for intruding," Carol began, "and I feel that I likewise owe you an explanation for my behavior yesterday."

"What did you say?" Miss Seenia questioned, mov-

ing a step closer. And then, guessing at the words: "Never mind, child, Sonia has taken all the blame."

Barry DeForest had been staring at Carol. As she turned toward him, he bowed politely.

"It is I who owe you an apology, Miss Scott," he said. "I had every intention of keeping our appointment, but at the last minute I was called here to confer with the Mercier sisters about an important matter. I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"It doesn't matter," Carol replied carelessly. "The maid gave me your message."

Barry DeForest glanced swiftly at Seenia who was straining to hear the conversation. He deliberately lowered his voice.

"You left the trinket at my home, Miss Scott?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. DeForest. But I can show it to you now if you like."

She started to open her purse, but before she could take out the tissue wrapped shadow stone, the lawyer spoke sharply and his words had the ring of a command.

"No! No! Not here! You must bring it to my house tomorrow. Tomorrow at the same hour!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### A BROKEN APPOINTMENT

"WHAT *are* you two saying?" Miss Seenia interrupted a trifle irritably. "Dear me, it's so annoying to be deaf. Why can't people talk in a normal tone?"

"I was merely telling Miss Scott how pleased I am to meet her again," Barry DeForest fairly shouted into the old lady's ear.

"Then you two are old friends."

"Scarcely that," Carol corrected. "We met for the first time last evening at the Country Club."

She was aware that the attorney regarded her intently, evidently expecting her to make some response to the invitation which he had issued so surreptitiously. When she offered none, he asked urgently:

"Shall I expect you tomorrow at three?"

"Why, I'll try to come," Carol answered vaguely. "I can't be sure."

This reply was not especially pleasing to DeForest. He frowned. But the next instant his face cleared and he said confidently:

"I shall look forward to your visit."

Turning his back upon Carol, he bowed low over Seenia's hand.

"I regret that I am unable to wait for Sonia now as I have a pressing engagement. I will call later this evening and bring the papers for you to sign."

"Papers?"

"The property settlement for Angela—"

"Oh, yes, to be sure. You have always managed our affairs, Barry, and I see no reason why we should not be guided by your judgment in this matter. I will talk with Sonia before you return."

The attorney bade his client good afternoon, nodded briefly to Carol and left the parlor. He crossed the courtyard, vanishing into the corridor which led to the street.

"A fine gentleman," Miss Seenia commented with a sigh. "I am sure I don't know how Sister and I would manage without him. Our holdings are so complicated that I don't half understand how he keeps everything straight."

It occurred to Carol to wonder if Barry DeForest might not find it embarrassing to give an accounting of the manner in which he had handled the Mercier fortune, but such a thought could never be expressed aloud. Certainly not to Seenia who would consider it sheer treason.

Carol was troubled because the attorney had advised

Seenia to acknowledge without delay Angela's claim to the Mercier fortune. It seemed to her that the affair should be settled with due deliberation after the girl had established beyond a shadow of doubt that she actually was Angela Mercier.

Carol knew that she had no real reason for questioning the girl's identity. She had been influenced in her feelings by Angela's unpleasant personality. The only adverse evidence consisted of the striking similarity of voice.

Yet try as she would, Carol could not rid herself of the conviction that the newcomer was none other than the masquerader who had worn the red imp suit. While it might not be her affair, she felt that she owed it to the Mercier sisters to reveal the information in her possession.

"If I were you, Miss Mercier, I shouldn't be in too great a hurry to settle up the estate," she began hesitatingly.

"What was that?" Seenia questioned in a loud tone.  
"You must speak more distinctly."

Carol was afraid to raise her voice lest it carry to Angela's bedroom. She wished that Sonia would return, for at least one could talk with her. Evidently the woman remained with her niece to help her unpack.

"I really must be going," Carol said, arising. She

knew it would be useless to try to make Seenia understand anything of a subtle nature. A warning would serve only to confuse the old lady.

"But you haven't met our niece," Seenia protested. "And Sonia will be disappointed not to see you. Remain for dinner."

"Thank you, but I couldn't possibly. I'll drop in again sometime soon."

In the lower courtyard, Carol paused. She really did not wish to leave without talking with Sonia. Impulsively, she took a paper from her purse and scribbled a brief note:

"Do not sign any property papers regarding Angela Mercier until I have had an opportunity to speak with you."

She signed her name, smiling as she reread the message. It sounded a trifle melodramatic. But a lengthy explanation would prove difficult.

Carol handed the note to Magnolia as she went out the door, requesting her to give it to Sonia without delay.

She walked slowly toward home, wondering if she had done a foolish thing. When she called at the Mercier home again, Sonia would expect an explanation for the note. Any accusation against Angela would be deeply resented unless she were able to substantiate it with evidence.

"How can I prove my theory?" she pondered. "I'm afraid I acted too impulsively."

Carol was still considering the problem when she halted at a corner drugstore for a chocolate soda. She paid the clerk absently, and as she attempted to close her pocketbook permitted it to tilt slightly. The tissue wrapped shadow stone slipped out, falling heavily to the floor.

Carol hastily retrieved it. She was relieved that the jade piece had not been damaged and after making a careful examination requested the clerk for a small box. She placed the trinket in the container, dropping it into her pocket. A few minutes later she left the store.

So intent was she upon her thoughts that she failed to observe a man in a dark-brimmed hat who stood in a doorway directly opposite the drugstore. As she emerged he crossed the street, and stealthily followed, gradually drawing closer and closer.

Even then Carol paid no heed to the soft thud-thud of footsteps. She was caught completely off guard when the man suddenly sprang forward and snatched her purse which she carried loosely under her arm.

He wheeled and fled.

"Stop, thief!" Carol cried, and after a moment of shocked surprise started to pursue him.

Other pedestrians turned to stare, but no one made

the slightest effort to halt the man. He darted into an alley and disappeared. A minute later in response to Carol's scream for help, a policeman came running up, but by that time she knew it would be useless to expect the thief's capture.

"How much money did you lose?" the policeman asked Carol.

"Less than fifty cents. The pocketbook contained nothing of value except—"

Carol's voice trailed off as she thought of the shadow stone. Then she laughed in sheer relief, remembering that she had removed the jade trinket from her purse while in the drugstore. The box was safe in her pocket.

It flashed through her mind that the thief might have known she carried the stone in her handbag. She dismissed the idea as ridiculous, only to have it return more forcibly as the policeman asked her if she could describe the person who had accosted her.

She had caught only a fleeting glimpse of the purse-snatcher, yet with photographic accuracy her mind had registered several significant details in regard to his appearance. He was short and fat, dark, and wore a brimmed hat which partially hid his face but could not conceal a prominent hooked nose.

As Carol mentioned these features it dawned upon her that she had given an excellent description of the

candy vendor. True, the purse-snatcher had been dressed in ordinary street clothes, but she had never believed that the vendor's costume was anything save a disguise.

"Perhaps that man was after my shadow stone," she thought. "But how could he know I had it on my person?"

Carol lingered in the vicinity while the policeman searched the block. He found no trace of the thief and presently came back to report his failure. She thanked him for his efforts in her behalf and then walked on toward home.

The incident annoyed Carol. She did not so much mind losing the purse for she had been wishing that she might purchase another, but she felt that she should have been more alert. If the thief actually were the candy vendor, she wondered how he had learned her identity.

Enroute home she occasionally glanced over her shoulder to see if she was being followed. No one appeared to be trailing her.

Jack was sitting in the porch swing when she mounted the steps to the house. He had an air of suppressed excitement as he made room for her beside him. Before she could launch into the tale of her afternoon's adventure, he forestalled her by saying quickly:

"Well, Sis, I think I have a real piece of information for you."

"Not about the shadow stone?" Carol inquired eagerly.

Jack shook his head.

"Not this time. It's something you'll want to hear about though."

"Tell me, Jack," Carol pleaded. "What is it?"

Jack smiled, thoroughly enjoying the state of suspense which he had created. Assuming a grand manner, he announced impressively: "I've found the House of the Peacock Shutters!"

## CHAPTER IX

### PEACOCK SHUTTERS

IN response to his sister's eager questions, Jack revealed that the house which she sought to locate was an ancient dwelling on a little-known street not far from the banana docks.

"Orley Dana tells me it's nothing but a vacant ruin now," he explained. "The wrought-iron shutters are the only distinguishing feature of the place."

"Who is Orley Dana?" Carol inquired.

"An architect who occasionally does work for Dad. I had to take some plans to his office today and while I was waiting for him to see me, I happened to glance through a sketch book which was lying on the table."

"Yes, go on."

"Say, don't rush me! Dana is an artist as well as an architect and he's made a particular hobby of wrought-iron work. This sketch book was filled with drawings of unusual balconies and staircases and things he'd copied from old houses in the French Quarter."

"Was there a drawing of the Peacock Shutter place, Jack?"

"Not of the house. Only the shutters. Naturally, I remembered what you had told me and later when I had the chance I asked Dana about the drawing. He said the shutters were genuine wrought-iron and unusually fine work. He hopes to buy them to use in a house he's building for himself, but so far he's been unable to locate the owner of the property."

"I don't care about the quality of the work," Carol interrupted impatiently. "I'm interested in the location of the house. Did you learn the exact address?"

"No, but Dana told me how to get there. I can find the place all right."

Carol glanced at her wrist watch. It was a few minutes after five o'clock.

"Let's go now," she proposed eagerly. "If we hurry we can get back home in time for dinner."

"It's pretty late," Jack protested. "Maybe we should wait—"

"Oh, Jack, I can't bear to waste a moment," his sister interrupted. "I'm so anxious to see the house. You remember the candy vendor spoke of the place in such a way that I half suspect dishonest persons are making their headquarters in the building."

"Orley Dana said the house was empty."

"Perhaps it was at the time he visited it. Oh, Jack, let's go there right now and investigate. We can be careful—"

"Say, I hope you don't think I'm afraid—"

"Of course not, Jack. But you wouldn't be so indifferent if you had been the one to find the shadow stone."

"I'm not indifferent," Jack denied. "I just think you're building yourself up for a big disappointment. You have such a vivid imagination."

"I suppose I imagined that advertisement in the paper?" Carol demanded indignantly.

"No, it was real enough."

"And I probably dreamed that my pocketbook was stolen today! By that same candy vendor too!"

Jack stared at his sister in astonishment. "You didn't tell me about that."

"I haven't had an opportunity. But it's true. I was walking near Canal when a man came up behind me and ran off with my purse. He looked very much like that vendor, and I suspect he thought he was getting the shadow stone."

Jack whistled softly. "That jade piece seems to be pretty important to someone!"

"I just hate to think of giving it up until after I've had an opportunity to learn its significance. Did Dad find out anything about the owner from the newspaper office?"

"He hasn't been home yet."

"Tomorrow I'll probably have to turn it in," Carol

sighed. She abruptly arose from the swing. "How about it, Jack? Do we visit the House of the Peacock Shutters?"

"Oh, all right, I guess we'll have time before dinner. I'll get the car."

While her brother went to the garage, Carol hastened into the house to tell her mother they were going for a short drive. Not wishing to take the shadow stone with her, she deposited it in the living room desk for safe keeping.

Jack was waiting with the car when she emerged from the house. They drove through the congested business section and then turned into a district which Carol seldom visited. The streets became narrow and twisting; frequently Jack was forced to stop the car and wait until a trucker with a load of cabbage or onions had passed. Men with pushcarts deliberately blocked the road, scowling when they heard the warning toot of the automobile horn.

At length Jack located the street which the architect had mentioned. Cruising slowly along, they peered at the dingy houses edging the sidewalk. They were nearly at the end of the thoroughfare when Carol pointed out a building which stood a space apart from its neighbors.

"Maybe that's it!" she exclaimed as her brother idled the car to a creeping pace.

"You're right. There are the peacock shutters, the same as I saw in Dana's drawing."

The house was an ancient one, the lower floor following the pattern of many French edifices, having been designed for use as a small business place. But any tenants it might ever have had long since had departed and left the rooms in a ram-shackle state of disrepair. Ragged children played hide and seek in the debris and an occasional chicken could be seen perched on a stray rafter.

The upper story still bore signs of recent habitation. From one tiny window peeped grimy, tattered curtains. The other apertures were concealed behind tightly closed iron shutters, wrought in a rare and ingenious design of two spreading peacocks.

"Drive a little past the house," Carol instructed. "We don't want to attract attention by appearing to look at it."

A few yards farther on, Jack stopped the car by the curbing. After studying the house for a bit they alighted, and slowly sauntered along the street.

"The place looks deserted," Jack commented.

Carol was of the same opinion but she moved casually to the front door and turned the knob. The door was locked.

A street urchin who played ball in the parking, stared curiously at the girl.

"Can you tell me if anyone lives in this house?" Carol inquired.

The child ran forward, eager to impart information.

"Not any more. The Clearmonts were the last ones but they left six months or more ago. A man came and put them out because they didn't pay their rent."

"There is too someone living there," another voice added importantly.

Carol and Jack turned to see that a ragged little boy had come up behind them.

"What do you know about the house?" Carol questioned.

"At night sometimes you can see a light shining through the shutters," the boy informed impressively.

"Some folks say its spooks but I don't think so."

"You're sure you didn't imagine the light?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"Course I'm sure! I've seen men go in the back door too."

"When was that?" Carol inquired alertly.

"Oh, three or four nights ago. I knocked on the door next morning but no one answered."

"The house seems deserted enough now," Jack said musingly.

"Sure, it's always quiet in daytime," the boy declared. "But I know there's a girl stays there. Only she won't answer the door."

"A girl?" Carol echoed, glancing quickly at her brother.

"I only saw her once," the urchin explained. "I was playing on our back porch when I looked up and there she was staring down at me from that diamond-shaped window."

"Which window?" Jack asked, studying the front of the house with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, it's at the back of the house, cut way up high near the roof. It's a funny little window with bars—when the sun shines on the panes it looks like a big eye."

"Can you describe the girl?" Carol questioned.

"Oh, she was real pretty, with shining black hair coiled up around her head. She kept making queer motions and acting silly-like. Then all at once she just disappeared. I guess she must have gone away for I haven't seen her since."

"How long ago was it that you saw the girl?" Jack interposed.

"Night before last."

"We'd like very much to look at the little window," Carol said quietly. "Can you show it to us?"

"Sure, you can see it plainly from our back yard."

The boy led the pair down a narrow passageway between the two houses to a tiny unkempt yard cluttered with old rubbish and discarded packing boxes. A

criss-cross clothes line was hung with damp, flapping garments.

"There it is," the boy indicated, pointing upward.

"The window *is* barred!" Carol exclaimed in an undertone to her brother. "And all the others are tightly shuttered. Odd to say the least, isn't it?"

Jack nodded as his eye roved over the dilapidated building. There was no sign of anyone stirring within, not a single indication that the upper story rooms were occupied.

"I wish we could get inside," Carol said.

"You can't," the little boy informed. "I've tried it lots of times. All the doors and windows are locked."

"Yet you're certain you've seen men enter the house at night?" Carol inquired dubiously. "And you noticed a girl by the window night before last?"

"Sure, don't you believe me?"

"Yes, of course," Carol assured him hastily. "I was just thinking aloud—it seems so odd—"

"There's just a chance someone is still in that room up by the roof," Jack said in an undertone. "Perhaps we can find out."

Stooping, he picked up a handful of gravel from the ground. Taking careful aim he tossed it upward so that it showered against the panes of the diamond shaped window.

The three who stood below waited expectantly. Several minutes elapsed.

"I guess the place must be empty," Jack acknowledged. "We may as well go."

He was turning to leave when Carol gripped his hand. Instantly his eyes traveled upward to the tiny window. Framed behind the bars was the startled face of a girl—a pretty girl with shining, black hair.

"There she is!" the small boy exclaimed. "She's the one I saw before."

The girl began to make peculiar motions. Jack and Carol divined that she was trying to communicate with them, but they were unable to grasp her meaning. However, it was evident to them that the girl could not open the barred window. Her lips framed a word which they interpreted as: "Wait!"

The face vanished from the window. Jack and Carol remained where they were, watching. Suddenly, they were startled by a loud crash from above. A heavy iron bolt came hurtling through the window to drop almost at Carol's feet. Tied to it was a folded scrap of paper.

## CHAPTER X

### A FACE AT THE WINDOW

"A MESSAGE!" Carol cried, stooping to pick up the bolt.

A folded piece of brown wrapping paper had been tied to the iron with a bit of string. Carol tore it loose and with Jack peering over her shoulder, quickly scanned the brief note, which bore no signature.

It read: "I am being held a prisoner in this house. Bring the police and I will reward you well."

With one accord, Jack and Carol raised their eyes upward to stare at the broken window, but there was no sign of the girl who had thrown the iron bolt through the pane. Could it be a joke? They were convinced that it was nothing of the sort.

"Do you have a telephone?" Jack inquired tersely of the small boy who stood with mouth agape.

He shook his head.

"Then I must go for the police. You stay here, Carol, and keep watch of the house. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Jack hastened away, and a moment later Carol heard the roar of the automobile as he drove off.

"Run around to the front of the house and keep watch of the door there," she instructed the boy. "If anyone attempts to leave the building, call for help!"

Left alone, Carol fastened her eyes upon the shattered diamond-shaped window. It was odd, she thought, that the dark-haired girl had not shown her face since hurling the bolt through the pane. One would think that she would be curious to learn if her message had been picked up.

"She's likely being guarded," Carol reasoned. "The sound of the window breaking may have brought her captors. In that case, they'll keep her back out of sight."

It was easy to imagine that she heard the sound of running footsteps within the house. She thought too she distinguished a muffled scream. Then all was silent.

Time dragged slowly. It seemed an hour to Carol although actually ten minutes had not elapsed, when Jack came running back into the yard.

"I've notified the police!" he told her. "They'll be here in a minute or two. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"No, the house has been quiet. I haven't caught a glimpse of anyone."

"I'll stay at the front of the building until the police

come. Unless they delay too long, we should be able to keep this place bottled-up."

In less than five minutes two police cars arrived upon the scene. They came silently, without sounding a siren, and Carol did not know they were there until officers ran into the back yard where she stood guard.

"Here is the note," she indicated. "You can see the broken window through which it was tossed."

A net of policemen was thrown about the house to prevent anyone from escaping. An officer tried the rear door and finding it locked, began to batter it down. The heavy timbers staunchly resisted for a time, then crashed in.

Policemen with drawn revolvers cautiously entered the house. Carol and Jack waited several minutes and then, hearing no shots or any unusual disturbance, could not resist following.

The lower floor was entirely vacant, save for a policeman who stood guard, and gave off an unpleasant, stale odor of a place too long closed. Carol nervously clutched her brother's hand as a rat darted across her path to take refuge in a hole along the wall.

A steep, warped stairway led upward. They could hear policemen tramping about above.

"Let's see if they've caught anyone," Jack proposed, moving up the stairway.

Carol trailed him up the creaking steps to the second floor. It was comprised of four square rooms, all empty. Several policemen were moving about, searching for clues and finding none.

A wooden ladder with broken rungs gave access to a stuffy, hot attic room, likewise deserted. Carol and Jack were bewildered as they gazed about, wondering what had become of the girl who had thrown the iron bolt through the window.

There was the diamond-shaped aperture yawning far above their heads. Smashed glass lay in jagged pieces on the floor. A sagging cot which gave mute evidence of having been recently slept in, had been drawn up directly under the window.

"The girl apparently stood on it when she signaled us," Carol observed.

A similar deduction had been made by the policemen who searched the cramped quarters, but they had found little additional evidence. Near the bed stood an empty jug, evidently used for drinking water. An old pie tin which had held food, was overturned in a corner of the room.

One of the officers picked up a girl's handkerchief without markings. Nothing further of interest was discovered.

"It seems strange the house is deserted," Carol commented in bewilderment. "The girl must be here somewhere."

"She was here," a policeman replied, "but the house is vacant now. Evidently it's been deserted for some time too."

"But that's impossible," Carol protested. "We saw the girl at the window only a few minutes ago. I'm certain it's a case of abduction."

"We've had no report of any girl missing."

Jack and Carol lingered while the policemen made a complete search of house and premises. They readily answered all inquiries put to them by the officers and offered an accurate description of the dark-haired girl seen at the window. The small boy who had watched the front door during Jack's absence likewise was questioned, and supported Carol in saying that no one had left the house after the note had been tossed through the window.

The policemen offered little comment, but their expressions disclosed that they were of the opinion either Carol or her small companion had failed to be observing. They thought it likely that someone had played a hoax upon the young people and then, without being seen, had slipped from the house before the arrival of the authorities.

Carol, decidedly crestfallen, could only maintain

that she was convinced no one had left the building.

"We'll throw a guard around the place for a time although it will probably be useless," an officer promised her.

A crowd, attracted by police activity in the neighborhood, soon gathered to stare at the house. Many were of the opinion that Jack and Carol were the culprits wanted at headquarters. Since they could be of no further service, the pair hastily quitted the scene, driving home to a belated supper.

Their long absence had caused Mr. and Mrs. Scott considerable concern. Dinner had been held up nearly an hour. Jack and Carol escaped a scolding when their parents learned why they were detained, but Aunt Becky scowled darkly as she served the evening meal. The old cook was very proud of her cooking and complained bitterly that the flavor of everything had been ruined.

"Why, the dinner is delicious," Carol assured her.  
"It wasn't hurt a bit."

Aunt Becky brightened somewhat under this praise, but she could not fail to notice that even Mr. and Mrs. Scott were so engrossed in the dinner table conversation that they did not do justice to the food.

"You seem to have developed a sudden flare for involving yourself in trouble," Mr. Scott remarked to his daughter after he had listened to her account of

the happenings at the Peacock Shutter house. "And I fear it all dates from the time you acquired the shadow stone."

"Oh, Dad, what did you learn about it today at the newspaper office?"

"Not a great deal, I must confess. However, enough to make me think that perhaps it may be well not to return the trinket to its owner without asking a few questions."

"Just what did you learn, Dad?"

"The advertisement was telephoned in by a man who gave his name as Harold Jordan. Inquiry revealed there is no such person living at the address attributed to him."

"Seemingly, the owner of the jade trinket doesn't care to have his true identity known," Carol said musingly.

"That's the way it appears. The advertising manager promised to investigate this man further, and to notify me in the event he ever calls in person at the office."

"In the meantime, what am I to do with the shadow stone?"

"Oh, I suppose it will do no harm to keep it for a few days."

Mrs. Scott looked slightly troubled at this decision but Carol smiled in delight.

"That suits me fine, Dad. I'll have a chance to take it to someone who may be able to read the inscription. And possibly I'll show it to Mr. DeForest tomorrow although I'm provoked at the way he broke his appointment with me today."

Nearly everyone who had viewed the shadow stone had expressed the opinion that the trinket bore a French inscription. Carol had no knowledge of the language for in school both she and Jack studied Spanish. Many persons of her acquaintance could translate French readily, but she feared they might ask too many questions regarding the curious stone. In running through a list of possibilities, she thought of Madame Renault who operated a hemstitching shop downtown. The woman was French, having arrived in New Orleans only a few years before from Paris. In addition to her duties at the little shop, she tutored pupils in her native language. Frequently, Carol had taken hemstitching work to her, often lingering to chat. She felt that Madame Renault might accommodate her without being too inquisitive.

"I'll go there tomorrow," Carol decided. "If the inscription is in French as I believe, she'll be able to read it."

The following day Carol had many errands requiring her attention. She was reminded by her mother that she had neglected to return the red imp costume

to the shop from which it had been rented. Already she would be charged an extra sum for keeping the garment overtime.

"I'll attend to it without fail," Carol promised.

Directly after luncheon, she wrapped up the suit, and likewise took the shadow stone from its place of concealment. She would have ample time to visit Madame Renault, return the costume, and still reach Barry DeForest's home before the appointed hour of three.

"I'd like to walk past the House of the Peacock Shutters too," Carol thought, "but I'm afraid I'll never manage it today."

She was just leaving the house, when Aunt Becky called after her to say that she was wanted on the telephone. Carol retraced her steps. She did not immediately recognize the voice which came to her over the wire.

"This is Sonia Mercier speaking," the other explained. "I received the message which you left for me. I must confess it deeply disturbed me."

"I didn't mean to worry you, Miss Mercier."

"You must come and talk with me as soon as you can," the woman urged. "If you have any information relating to Angela, you should not withhold it. When can you come?"

"I'll try to call today," Carol promised.

"Good. I shall be waiting for you."

Carol smiled ruefully as she gathered up her bundle and again left the house. She was almost sorry that she had tried to warn the Mercier sisters, for she had gleaned no evidence to support her belief that the girl Angela was the same person who had worn the red imp suit during Mardi Gras.

"It's all a tangled mess," she thought unhappily, "and as Dad says, I seem to have a gift for involving myself in trouble. I wish now I had attended to my own affairs instead of upsetting the Mercier sisters over something which may not be true at all."

As she walked slowly toward the costume shop, Carol considered what she would say to Miss Sonia when she called later at her home in the French Quarter. She knew that the interview would prove difficult and she must take care not to make any accusations which could not be proven. Too late she acknowledged that she had made a mistake in writing the note.

Presently, Carol entered a dimly lighted shop which bore the neatly lettered sign: "Mrs. Hutchins: Costumes for rent or sale."

The tiny room was fairly cluttered with masquerade garments and masks of various description. Tables were piled high with labeled boxes. A taut string stretched across the room from which dangled clown

masks, demon faces and grinning skulls. Mrs. Hutchins, the plump, red-faced woman who owned the shop was standing on a step ladder, sorting boxes and stacking them away on the high shelves.

As Carol entered, she gave up her work, and still breathing rapidly from the exertion, came over to the counter. She silently accepted the bundle which the girl offered, ripped it open and minutely examined the red imp costume for signs of soil or injury.

"It's all right, isn't it?" Carol inquired.

The woman nodded and smiled. "Yes, you've taken good care of it, but you'd be surprised at the way some folks abuse the costumes they rent. Only this morning a man returned an imp suit which had been torn half across. He was furious because I charged him for the damage."

"I suppose you rented a great many imp costumes for Mardi Gras," Carol remarked.

"Oh, yes, it's always a popular costume. But there weren't many like the one you borrowed—at least not from my shop. I had only one bolt of goods of this particular material and shade of red—just enough to make three little suits."

"Isn't that odd?" Carol remarked, trying not to disclose that the information had interested her unduly. "During the Mardi Gras I ran into a girl who might have been my twin. I'm certain she wore an identical

costume. We talked together but I didn't learn her name. I don't suppose you have a record of the persons to whom those two suits were loaned?"

"Oh, yes, I always keep records. If I didn't I'd lose every costume in my shop. Wait and I'll see if I can find it."

From a table drawer, Mrs. Hutchins removed a thick account book. She put on a pair of gold rimmed spectacles and turned slowly through the pages.

"Yes, here it is. A girl named Harriet Onslow rented one of the suits."

Looking over the proprietress' shoulder, Carol took mental note of the address.

"And the other costume?" she inquired, as Mrs. Hutchins started to close her book.

"Oh, it hasn't come in yet. Which reminds me I must send the man a letter today and remind him to settle up."

"Man?" Carol echoed in astonishment.

"Yes, he rented it for his daughter."

"You have a record of his name?"

"It's here somewhere." Mrs. Hutchins frowned impatiently, but she reopened her account book and thumbed through several more pages. Presently she found the item which she sought.

"That's it," she indicated. "The man who rented the costume was Barry DeForest."

## CHAPTER XI

### MRS. HUTCHINS' RECORD BOOK

CAROL, startled by the familiar name, peered over Mrs. Hutchins' shoulder to make certain that she had heard correctly.

"Mr. DeForest never mentioned he had a daughter," she murmured to herself. "I always thought he was a bachelor."

"What was that?" Mrs. Hutchins inquired sharply.

"Nothing," Carol said hastily, "I was just talking to myself."

She thanked the woman for the information, and after paying the small bill which she owed, left the shop.

"I don't suppose it means a thing," she reasoned, "and yet, it is an odd coincidence that Barry DeForest's daughter should have worn a Mardi Gras costume exactly like mine."

The afternoon was only beginning, but Carol knew she must hasten if she were to attend to all of her errands and still keep the appointment with Mr. DeForest at three o'clock. Reflecting that possibly she might meet his daughter during the call at the house,

she looked forward with increasing interest to the interview.

Carol now approached the French Quarter, and so turned down the shadowy street leading to the Court of the Two Sisters. In response to her rap on the door, she was immediately admitted by Magnolia who evidently had been instructed to watch for her.

"Miss Seenia's takin' a nap in her room," the colored maid explained, "but Miss Sonia's waitin' in de parlor."

"Is Angela with her?" Carol inquired cautiously.

"No, Miss, she ain't. Angela went out fo' a walk an hour ago, and Ise plenty glad to see her go. She's a little piece, dat gal is! Dis old house ain't had a quiet moment since she come to roost here!"

The colored woman led Carol down the corridor past the splashing fountain to the courtyard, and then stood respectfully aside to permit the girl to precede her up the stairway.

In the parlor, Sonia, gowned in black silk, was seated at the great square piano, softly playing a simple melody which had been popular in the days of her girlhood. As Carol entered, she quickly arose and offered her hand in greeting.

"I am so glad you came, Miss Scott. Since Magnolia gave me your note, I have been greatly upset. I don't know what to think."

"You haven't signed any property over to Angela?" Carol asked.

"No, last evening Mr. DeForest brought the papers, but I was so bewildered by your message, that I told him to return later. I can't understand why you advise delay in settling up the affairs of my niece."

"For that matter, I fear it is no concern of mine at all," Carol acknowledged apologetically, accepting the plush chair which Sonia drew up for her. "I'll admit I wrote the note impulsively, but I really had good reason for doing it. I'll try to explain."

She then spoke of her strange meeting with the mysterious girl in the red imp suit. Save that she made no direct mention of the shadow stone, she revealed all details of the adventure.

Miss Sonia listened politely but did not appear impressed with the story.

"This is all very interesting," she said when Carol had finished, "but I fail to understand how it concerns my niece."

"Why, don't you see, Miss Mercier? When I came here yesterday and heard Angela speak, I was certain she was the same girl I had met on the street. Obviously, in that case, she is not your niece but an imposter—perhaps some girl who read of Angela's expected arrival in the newspaper and hoped to secure the property in her stead."

Sonia could not restrain a smile.

"My dear child, if you will pardon me for saying so, such a theory is fantastic!"

"Angela failed to arrive on her regular train," Carol persisted. "She may have been forcibly detained so that this other girl could take her place!"

"Such things do not occur in this day and age, Miss Scott. I fear you have been reading too many thrilling stories."

Carol flushed but shook her head. She said bluntly: "Would it not be easy for a strange girl to deceive you? You told me yourself that you had never set eyes upon your niece until she came here."

"True, but my sister and I do not question Angela's identity—not for a minute. The girl does not resemble the Merciers, I admit, and in many ways she has been a disappointment to us. However, that is no reason for us to deprive her of her rightful inheritance."

"But it seems to me you should require her to prove that she is the real Angela Mercier," Carol maintained.

"Oh, she is prepared to do that. Perhaps I should not reveal this to you for few persons know of it, but my sister and I have a secret means of establishing Angela's identity."

"You mean she has credentials—family papers or letters?"

"Yes," Miss Sonia smiled, "Angela already has turned over to us several documents and photographs which were given to her by Henri before his death. However, that was not what I had in mind. My sister and I have still another means of identification—one which is certain."

Miss Mercier hesitated, and Carol, feeling that she had displayed altogether too much interest in the other's affairs, remained silent.

"When my brother, Henri, left home he took with him a valuable heirloom," Sonia related after a moment of reflection. "I shall not tell you the nature of this heirloom for the secret is known only to my sister, Angela, and myself. At any rate, this heirloom had been in the Mercier family for many generations, and, according to the tradition always passed into the hands of the first-born son.

"Shortly before his death, Henri gave the heirloom to his daughter, Angela, explaining its significance. This token, when delivered to Seenia and me, establishes her claim to the property."

"And Angela has the identification token in her possession?" Carol questioned.

"Yes, we have discussed it with her, and she has promised to turn the heirloom over to us whenever the financial settlement is made."

"Then I guess there's nothing more to say," Carol

remarked in a crestfallen tone. "You must forgive me for interfering. I assure you I meant well."

"I know you did," Sonia replied kindly. "Please don't look so downcast. I shall ring for tea and we'll forget all this."

Carol knew that she would not forget her blunder for many a day, but she smiled and tried to dismiss the matter temporarily from her mind. Magnolia soon brought a handsome silver pot, an heirloom which would have caused the eye of any collector to brighten. Miss Sonia poured the steaming beverage into tiny cups and passed dainty sugared cakes. She tried especially to place her young guest at ease again, but Carol was relieved when a decent interval of time had elapsed and she was free to go.

"I have an appointment to call at Mr. DeForest's home," she mentioned, arising. "I look forward to viewing his jade collection, and perhaps to meeting his daughter."

"His daughter?"

"Why, yes."

"Barry DeForest has no daughter. He is a bachelor."

"You are certain—"

"Of course. Seenia and I have known Mr. DeForest for twenty years."

"I seem to have been misinformed again," Carol

said with a sigh. "I hope I don't make any more blunders today."

"Mr. DeForest would be highly amused to hear the rumor that he has a daughter," Sonia smiled. "I must tell him the joke when he calls. And that reminds me—may I ask a favor?"

"Certainly."

"If you see Mr. DeForest this afternoon, I wish you would give him a message for me."

"I'll be very glad to do it."

"Request him to drop in here this evening and bring the papers which he has prepared for Seenia and me to sign. I see no need for delaying the matter further."

"I'll tell him, Miss Mercier."

"I was really deeply worried when I read your note," Sonia confessed as she escorted the girl to the courtyard. "I'm so glad there was nothing over which to be alarmed."

Carol had her own opinion of this, but she wisely refrained from reopening a painful subject. Leaving the Court of the Two Sisters, she walked swiftly toward the DeForest residence. A clock in a shop window warned her that she would be late for the appointment. It was a quarter past the hour when she actually reached the house.

This time she was politely received by the slatternly

maid and escorted to a study where Barry DeForest awaited her. The frown which puckered his shaggy brows cleared away as he arose to greet her in genial fashion.

"I am very glad that you came," he declared warmly, drawing up a chair for her. "I had begun to think you had failed me again."

Carol explained that she had been detained at the Mercier home and repeated Miss Sonia's message. The attorney nodded, offering no comment. Yet it seemed to Carol that an expression akin to relief came over his face.

"And now, I suppose you would like to look at my jade collection," he remarked pleasantly.

"Indeed, I would."

Mr. DeForest took a key from the upper desk drawer and unlocked a tall glass case which stood against the wall. Carol was slightly disappointed as she gazed at the assortment of pieces upon display. There was an attractive green cup, a ring with a cameo-like face and several other small articles. She had viewed far more impressive items in the local museums.

Mr. DeForest, who was watching her keenly, smiled at her disappointment.

"One cannot always judge the quality of jade by its size."

"Oh, of course not," Carol said hastily, feeling ashamed of her thoughts. "These pieces are beautiful—you must excuse me if I don't seem properly appreciative. You see, I know nothing of jade."

"I have made a study of it myself, Miss Scott. And that reminds me—did you bring the little trinket of which you spoke?"

"Yes, I have it with me."

Carol fumbled in her purse for the tissue-wrapped shadow stone. She offered it to the attorney and was amazed that his hand trembled with eagerness as it chanced to touch hers.

Mr. DeForest sat down at his desk again, switching on the electric light. He adjusted an eye glass and studied the jade piece intently. Yet Carol could tell nothing of his thoughts for his face was as expressionless as a mask.

"Is it a valuable stone?" she inquired at length.

DeForest stared at her for a moment. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Off hand I should say that it has a reasonable value," he replied finally. "The quality of the jade is not the best, yet it is a curious stone."

"Perhaps you can tell me the meaning of the inscription."

"It is in French. Unfortunately, I do not read that language. However, if you care to leave this stone in

my possession for a few days, I'll be glad to have it translated for you."

Carol looked somewhat embarrassed. She said haltingly: "I—I don't believe I can do that, Mr. DeForest. I had planned to take it to some other person."

The attorney stared at her coldly.

"Someone you can trust?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I should strongly advise against showing this jade piece indiscriminately. By the way, are many persons aware that you have it?"

"Why, no, not to my knowledge," Carol answered in surprise. "I've told my own family, of course."

"And the Mercier sisters, perhaps?"

Carol shook her head. "Why do you ask, Mr. DeForest?"

The attorney laughed lightly. "Now I can see that I have alarmed you, my dear, and I don't wish to do that. However, there are many superstitions connected with the ownership of jade—it is not an especially lucky stone. According to my understanding this piece came into your hands through an unusual circumstance—an adventure."

"That is true," Carol agreed. It seemed to her that Mr. DeForest was talking in wide sweeps, deliberately evading the question she had asked.

"Has it occurred to you that there may be some

sinister plot connected with this stone?" the attorney asked abruptly.

Carol was startled by this unexpected directness. She answered instantly: "Yes, I've thought of it."

"My advice to you is to leave the stone here in my care for a few days. I assure you I will keep it safe and at the same time relieve you of any possible danger."

"Danger?"

"It is only a feeling I have, of course," Mr. DeForest said hastily. "But where jade is concerned I've been accused of having a sixth sense."

"Do you know anything about this particular stone which you haven't told me, Mr. DeForest?"

"Certainly not. However, I do not doubt it has a strange history. If you will leave it with me I may be able to learn—"

Carol shook her head, and reaching out took the shadow stone from the attorney's reluctant hand.

"Then since you have decided to keep the stone, you must be prepared to abide by the consequence," Mr. DeForest said. He spoke quietly enough in a casual tone but his words rang unpleasantly in Carol's ears.

She glanced at the little gold clock on the desk. It was after four o'clock.

DeForest, divining her intention to leave, hastily arose and said: "Excuse me for a moment, please."

He crossed to the hall and vanished. A few minutes later in a distant part of the house, Carol thought she heard him talking on the telephone.

Restlessly, she arose and wandered about the room, pausing to gaze again into the case of jade objects. Perhaps she had been unwise to refuse to leave the shadow stone with Mr. DeForest. He had meant to do her a favor, doubtlessly, but for some reason she had taken a dislike to the man. She imagined her prejudice resulted from the comment she had heard about him. His life and actions were a riddle to so many persons.

"I'd like to ask him if he rented a red imp suit from Mrs. Hutchins," she thought. "She told me it was for his daughter, and yet he has none."

Carol determined to casually lead up to the subject but when Mr. DeForest returned a few minutes later she had no opportunity to do so. His manner had undergone an abrupt change. He glanced suggestively at the clock as if waiting for Carol to speak of leaving.

"I hope I don't seem lacking in hospitality," he remarked, "but I have just received a telephone call from a client who wishes to see me immediately at my office."

"I was just leaving," Carol said.

Mr. DeForest rang a bell and the colored maid ap-

peared to show the girl to the door. Carol slowly descended the steps, locked in her own thoughts. So absorbed was she that she failed to notice the approach of another girl who walked swiftly toward the house with head bent low. They met face to face on the lower step.

"I beg your pardon," Carol apologized automatically.

At the sound of her voice, the strange girl gave a gasp of astonishment.

"You!" she exclaimed, recoiling a step.

Carol too was startled by the unexpected meeting, and with good reason. She found herself gazing directly into the angry face of the girl who called herself Angela Mercier.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE INSCRIPTION REVEALED

"ANGELA MERCIER, I believe?" Carol inquired with a quizzical smile. She could not resist adding slyly: "I really am flattered that you appear to know me, since I'm confident we have never been introduced."

She stressed the last word ever so slightly, having chosen it deliberately. It struck fire, she noted, for an angry gleam came into the other girl's eyes. They had met before—they both knew that.

In the unguarded moment of their first encounter, Angela had revealed by her actions that she was the same masquerader who had worn the red imp suit during Mardi Gras. Carol was as certain of this as if she had actually seen the girl's face upon that memorable day.

"I—I beg your pardon," Angela stammered, nonplussed by the swift attack. "I mistook you for another. Your voice—"

"Sounded strangely familiar perhaps?" Carol interposed. "Odd—but I had the same feeling about you."

"How did you know my name?" the other demanded harshly.

"I'm not certain that I do," Carol responded evenly.

"But I have heard the Mercier sisters speak of their niece many times."

"Do you hint that I am not Angela Mercier?"

"Oh, I make no accusations—at least not yet."

"I don't know who you are or what you have to do with Seenia and Sonia Mercier," the other replied heatedly, "but my advice is to keep entirely out of their affairs. And get this straight! I am Angela Mercier. If you try to prove otherwise, you'll find yourself in for real trouble."

"You sound very ferocious!" Carol retorted.  
"Threats are cheap."

"Listen!" The other girl caught her by the wrist, but Carol jerked free and walked rapidly away.

She did not wish to involve herself in another public brawl similar to the one which had ensued upon their first unfortunate meeting. Carol felt too that she was gaining nothing by prolonging the conversation; actually, she was losing. She realized now, when it was too late to retract her words, that she had been foolish to reveal her suspicions.

"To forewarn is to forearm," Carol thought ruefully. "I've thrown away all my advantage and I may have exposed myself to genuine danger. That girl is involved in some plot against the Mercier sisters."

Carol had half anticipated that Angela would demand the return of the shadow stone. Plainly, the

girl had refrained from speaking of the jade piece because to do so would prove conclusively that she was the same person who had worn the red imp suit during the Mardi Gras parade.

It occurred to Carol that an attempt might be made to follow her home. She glanced back. Angela Mercier had not moved from the steps of the DeForest residence.

"I'd like to learn if she goes into that house," Carol thought.

If such had been the original intention of the girl, she abandoned it. Noting that she was under observation, she abruptly turned and walked down the street in the opposite direction from the one Carol had taken.

"Like as not she'll sneak back after I am out of sight," Carol reflected. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she came to see Barry DeForest in the hope he can speed up the financial settlement with the Mercier sisters."

The events of the afternoon had left her in a somewhat bewildered state of mind. She had uncovered damaging evidence against Angela, yet she doubted that it would carry weight with either Seenia or Sonia Mercier. She was soberly considering what she ought to do when she came to the Renault Hemstitching Shop.

As she entered, she could hear Madame Renault's sewing machine singing busily in a rear room. The sound ceased and the petite French woman hurried to the front of the store to greet Carol. She smiled as she recognized the girl.

"I'm sorry I have no work for you this afternoon," Carol said regretfully. "Instead I came to ask a favor."

"I am very glad to serve Mademoiselle, if I have the capability. *Oui!*"

"I should like to have you translate a few words of French for me."

"Ah, that should be a simple matter," the woman smiled. "You have brought the passage with you?"

"It isn't exactly a passage, Madame Renault. It's an inscription on a stone."

Carol took out the jade trinket, offering it to the woman. She squinted at it through her gold-rimmed glasses for a moment, and shook her head.

"Can't you read it?" Carol questioned in disappointment.

"The letters are so tiny and my eyes are not good for close work. But wait! I have a glass which magnifies!"

The woman hastened to the rear room, returning a minute later with the lens. She studied the shadow stone and then smiled.

"This translation, it is easy to make. *Oui! Je maintiendrai le droit.*' "

"And what does it mean?"

"I will defend the right.' A very nice sentiment."

Carol repeated the words to stamp them indelibly in her mind. After chatting with Madame Renault for a few minutes, she thanked her for her assistance and left the shop. She was pleased to have learned the meaning of the inscription even though it did not have as much significance as she had hoped.

At the next corner Carol boarded a bus which would carry her home. She did not notice the strange man who followed her into the vehicle and took a seat directly opposite, but a few minutes later in alighting near her own street, she observed that he too left the bus.

Carol thought nothing of this until she had walked a block or two. Then she became aware that the man was still behind her, timing his pace exactly with hers. When she loitered, he too slackened his gait rather than pass her.

"I wonder if I'm being followed?" Carol asked herself with slight apprehension. "Lucky for me I'm so close home."

Recalling the incident of the purse-snatcher, she tightened her grip upon her pocketbook and walked swiftly on. Now and then she glanced over her

shoulder, but the man seemed to be paying no special attention to her although he still followed somewhat farther behind. Carol decided that perhaps she had been alarmed unnecessarily.

Nevertheless, she was glad to turn in at her own home. Feeling quite safe upon her own premises, she paused to watch the stranger. His wide-brimmed hat was pulled so low over his eyes that she could gain no view of his features. However, she was satisfied that he was not the same person who had snatched her purse. The man did not glance toward her, but walked slowly on down the street.

"Probably he lives in this neighborhood," Carol thought. "My imagination is working over-time these days."

She entered the house to find Aunt Becky bustling about in the kitchen, baking a pecan pie. Otherwise the place seemed deserted.

"Where is everyone, Aunt Becky?"

"Has you forgot, Miss Carol? Dis de night yo' parents takes dinneh at de country club."

"Oh, of course! I remember now Mother told me she and Dad wouldn't be home until fairly late. Where's Jack?"

"Nobody know where dat boy eveh is! But he come 'round in time for dinneh. Pecan pie draw dat boy like sugah do a bee!"

"Your pies would draw anyone," Carol laughed.

Moving on to the study, her first act was to place the shadow stone in the desk. She had just closed the drawer when she heard a car on the driveway. It was Jack.

Carol ran out to greet him but before she had uttered a word, he sprang from the car and came hurrying toward her, his freckled face unusually animated.

"Say, I have some news that will knock you for a tailspin!" he exclaimed. "I've made some real discoveries this afternoon."

"You mean about the shadow stone?" Carol questioned eagerly. She had not thought that her brother had taken a very deep interest in the affair which so intrigued her.

"It's about that Mercier girl—the one who claims to be Angela," Jack informed with an impressive air. "I've uncovered the biggest piece of news yet! She's a fraud."

"I've been sure of that from the very first, Jack."

"Sure, I know, but you didn't have any proof. That's where I'm one jump ahead of you. Look at this."

Jack thrust a small-sized camera photo into his sister's hand. It was a picture of an attractive dark-haired girl sitting in a garden with a white collie at her feet.

"Who is she?" Carol inquired blankly.

"Angela Mercier."

"Angela Mercier? How do you know?"

"Because I'm a natural born detective, and I don't work at the job half as hard as you do," Jack grinned. "I use my brains."

"Oh, stop trying to tease!" Carol cried impatiently. "Where did you get this picture?"

"From Mrs. Gifford of New Haven. I thought I'd do a little sleuthing of my own just to show you the proper method of going about it. It was a simple matter to get the woman's address—I merely telephoned Sonia Mercier and asked her for it."

"You had plenty of nerve."

"That's a necessary requisite of a good detective, dear sister."

"I still don't see how you obtained this photograph. There hasn't been time—"

"Telegraph offices are still open," Jack smiled. "I merely wired Mrs. Gifford, requesting her to mail me by air a photo of Angela Mercier. The letter came this afternoon, and as you can easily see, the picture doesn't resemble the girl who arrived here and calls herself by that name. At least, it doesn't correspond to your description of the fair damsel."

Carol studied the photograph again. "It's not the same person, Jack. This girl looks like the one we

saw in the window of that old house with the Peacock Shutters!"

"My sentiments exactly! I wondered if you'd notice the resemblance?"

Carol stared at her brother a moment before speaking. "Do you think—" she began, but he cut her short.

"That isn't all the sleuthing I did," Jack went on proudly. "Naturally when I saw this picture, I scented a mouse in the woodpile. You were gone so I decided to prowl around by myself and see what I could discover at the railroad station."

"I don't see what you could hope to learn there."

"You'd be surprised! I picked up quite a few scraps of information and they all tend to prove that the real Angela Mercier was the victim of treachery. First, I flashed this photo around among the porters asking if they had carried luggage for a girl who resembled the picture. None of them had and I was about to give up when I thought of talking with the women's matron."

"Had she seen the girl?"

"Yes, and remembered her distinctly. Angela arrived the day she was supposed to reach here and was pretty bewildered when no one met her train."

"That was because Sonia was late in reaching the station."

"Yes, maybe the taxi driver was paid to delay Miss Mercier on the way—I don't know about that. Anyway, Angela was talking with the matron, wondering what she should do, when two men came up and said Miss Mercier had sent them. They claimed to be cousins or something of the sort."

"And the matron allowed Angela to go with them?" Carol gasped.

"Sure. They told a straight sounding story, she thought, and it all seemed logical enough. Anyway, that's my theory of the way Angela disappeared. It was the work of several conspirators. This girl who claims to be Angela is an impostor selected because she slightly resembles the real heiress."

"And the plot, obviously, is to gain a generous slice of the Mercier property before Sonia or Seenia become aware of the deception," Carol added, frowning thoughtfully. "But that may not be so easy to accomplish. I remember Sonia distinctly mentioned that Angela must prove her identity by means of a certain token."

"What sort of token?"

"A family heirloom of some kind. I suspect, Jack, that already it has been taken by force from the real Angela Mercier. Taken and lost perhaps."

"Lost?"

Carol's eyes were bright with excitement as she

replied: "Jack, hasn't it occurred to you that possibly this mysterious identity token is the same jade stone which I found? You recall that during the Mardi Gras parade the candy vendor attempted to deliver it to Angela—or rather to the girl who calls herself by that name."

"But you're not certain she is the same one who wore the red imp suit."

"I feel positive about it now, Jack. Today I gained additional proof."

Carol quickly recounted her visit to the costume shop, mentioning her chance meeting with the Mercier girl near the residence of the attorney.

"It does seem to fit in," Jack soberly acknowledged. "If the shadow stone should turn out to be the identity trinket, that explains why the person who ran the threatening ad in the newspaper is trying so desperately to get the token back."

"But he never will now," Carol chuckled. "The stone is perfectly safe in Dad's desk, for no one knows where I live."

"Unless you've been traced here. You say that girl recognized you today."

"Yes, but she was afraid to follow me. She knew I would be watching for her to do just that. I did think for a minute that a man trailed me from the bus, but I'm sure it was only my imagination."

"Now that we have this information, what's the move?" Jack inquired. "Shall we go to the police or to the Mercier sisters?"

"I think we should reveal our findings to Sonia and Seenia first, Jack. Now that we have the picture of Angela and the letter from Mrs. Gifford, the truth will be forced upon them. Let's go right now too."

Before Jack could respond, Aunt Becky came to the kitchen door to call them to dinner. Not wishing to disappoint her, they decided to postpone their trip until after they had eaten.

It was dusk by the time the pair finally drove away from the house. They had brought with them the photograph of Angela and Mrs. Gifford's letter, but were several blocks upon their way when Carol remembered that she had forgotten the shadow stone.

"Never mind going back for it," she said to her brother. "I'll tell Sonia about the stone and show it to her tomorrow."

Traveling toward the Mercier home, Carol and Jack discussed the possible fate of the girl who had disappeared. From their joint gleanings, they were convinced that the heiress had been taken under duress from the railroad station to some place of confinement. It was Carol's theory, and in this her brother concurred, that Angela had been imprisoned at the House of the Peacock Shutters.

"Of course she's no longer there," Carol commented. "She must have been spirited away immediately after she dropped that note."

"It's queer how the girl was taken from the house without being seen."

"I never will understand that, Jack. I'm still certain no one went out of either the front or back door."

"It's a cinch they didn't go out the roof, so that leaves only one possibility—an underground escape through the cellar."

"I don't think the house had one, Jack. So few do here in New Orleans."

"I wish we had noticed when we were inside the place."

"So do I. Maybe we could drive past there now."

"It isn't far out of our way, but I doubt if we can get inside."

Jack altered his route and within a short while drew up near the House of the Peacock Shutters. By this time the streets had grown dark. They were relieved to observe no one loitering in the vicinity of the old dwelling.

Jack took a flashlight from the car pocket and together they walked down the alley to the rear of the building. They were not surprised to find the doors boarded up. Carol tested several windows. They

were all locked but in one a pane had been broken. It was a simple matter to reach inside, unfasten the catch and raise the sash.

Jack lifted his sister through and they closed the window after them. The interior of the house was dark. Carol gripped her brother's hand nervously, clinging to him while he flashed his light slowly over the floor and walls. They were unable to find an exit leading downward although it seemed to them both that the house had been built high enough above ground to permit a shallow storage room under the flooring.

"There's nothing here," Jack said in disappointment. "We saw everything the first visit."

"Let's take one more look at the attic room," Carol proposed. "We may have passed up some clue."

"Not much chance of finding anything in the dark," Jack grumbled, but obediently he guided his sister up the creaking stairs.

As they flashed the light about the dingy walls, the beam came to rest upon a piece of furniture which previously had escaped their notice. It was an empty built-in bookcase. Directly in front of it on the floor stretched an old piece of rag carpet.

Although there was nothing unusual about the massive case or the tattered rug, something pertaining to the arrangement struck Carol as peculiar. Without

knowing exactly her reason for doing so, she walked over and attempted to open the massive glass door. It stubbornly resisted her efforts, even when she pulled with all her strength.

"Here let me do it!" Jack exclaimed.

Handing Carol the flashlight to hold he grasped the door handle and gave it a hard jerk.

The door swung back but simultaneously, a circle of flooring directly beneath the rug gave way. Jack tried desperately to save himself. Failing, he crashed forward down a flight of circular stairs into darkness.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SECRET ROOM

"JACK! Jack! Are you hurt?" Carol called in terror, flashing her light down through the semi-circular opening in the floor.

"I'm all right," came the muffled voice of her brother. "Lucky for me I didn't fall clear to the bottom!"

Carol could see a steep flight of stairs descending into what appeared to be a small room. Jack was sitting on a step half-way down, rubbing his head.

"Bring the light and come on down!" he invited.  
"Only watch yourself or you'll tumble the way I did."

Carol cautiously lowered herself through the yawning gap and then after descending a few steps paused to look upward. From the lower level it was easy to see why Jack had fallen. The old bookcase had been designed with a mechanism which opened at one operation both the glass door and the circle of flooring. When the door swung back the floor directly in front of the case sank away to reveal the hidden stairway. Jack demonstrated how even from below, the circular

trap could be pushed upward into place. They heard the door of the bookcase close above them.

"Now you've done it, Jack!" Carol exclaimed, thoroughly alarmed. "We may be imprisoned down here."

Her brother scoffed at the idea and to quiet her fears opened and closed the trap again.

"The mechanism is simple," he explained. "If I hadn't given the bookcase door such a hard jerk, the floor would have opened up slowly."

"I begin to understand why the house was deserted when the police came to search," Carol remarked in awe. "Very likely Angela was spirited down here until after the officers had gone."

"Let's see what we can discover below," Jack urged.

In their elation over the important finding, neither thought of fear. Guided by the flashlight beam they descended to what they imagined must be approximately ground level of the house. There the stairway opened into a small square room.

Save for a battered desk, the quarters were empty.

"This room must have been used for a hide-out all right," Jack commented. "Funny that the police failed to discover the stairway."

"One naturally wouldn't be suspicious of an empty bookcase, Jack. We learned the secret by sheer accident."

The tiny room bore evidence that the former occupants had quitted it in haste. Jack found a short piece of rope and a girl's scarf. A few papers were scattered over the floor, several desk drawers were half open, indicating that the contents had been cleared out.

"This must be Angela Mercier's scarf," Carol declared, examining it closely. "We'll keep it to show to the police."

She held the light for Jack while he searched the desk for additional clues. In the top drawer he found the remains of a ham sandwich, a dirty cup, a half filled bottle of ink and a copy of a newspaper. Carol instantly noted that it was a New Haven paper and turned the pages until she came to a feature story which had been marked with pencil.

"Look, Jack!" she commanded. "Here's an item about Angela Mercier, saying that she is to inherit a fortune. And her picture has been published too!"

The cut which she indicated was indistinct and slightly blurred, yet even at first glance both Carol and Jack recognized the girl as the same one who had dropped the note from the window.

"This proves conclusively that the true Angela was held here!" Carol exclaimed. "The girl who calls herself by that name is a fraud!"

"The picture is a dead ringer for the one Mrs. Gif-

ford sent," Jack agreed, taking it from his pocket to make a comparison. "Maybe we'll find some more evidence."

He opened several additional drawers but they were all empty. In the last one he came upon several scraps of paper. They appeared to be receipts so he examined them minutely.

"What do you make of this, Carol?" he asked, indicating one of the slips. "It seems to be a notation of three hundred dollars paid for rent."

"Twin Oaks Plantation," Carol read. "It seems to me I've heard of the place but I can't remember in exactly the connection."

"Here's another receipt," Jack announced. "One hundred and fifty paid for rent of 'North Star.'"

"'North Star,'" Carol repeated in bewilderment. "That doesn't sound like the name of anything—certainly not a plantation."

"That's what it says. Unless I can't read straight."

Carol examined the receipt for herself and agreed that Jack had not been mistaken in the words. She stared at the writing a moment, and then with a puzzled shake of her head, handed it back to her brother.

"We'll turn over everything to the police—" Jack began, only to break off. His body grew tense as he strained every muscle, listening.

"What is it?" Carol whispered fearfully.

Then she too heard the disturbing sound. Someone was walking across a floor, seemingly directly above the tiny room. Several ancient boards creaked and groaned.

Carol switched off the flashlight and moved close beside her brother. She was not ashamed to be afraid. She felt his hand tremble too as she gripped it nervously.

They waited. It seemed an age before they distinguished a faint clicking sound which told them that the bookcase in the attic room had been unlocked. A chain squeaked as the trap door leading to the secret room, slowly lowered.

Jack swept his sister back against the wall. They flattened themselves there, listening. Step by step they could hear someone with heavy boots descending the stairway.

As yet the pitch darkness of the room offered the pair a certain protection, for the person who crept so cautiously down the steep steps, apparently carried no light. They could hear his regular, heavy breathing.

Then a dim, shadowy figure emerged into the room. With cat-like tread he moved directly to the desk. There he struck a match but his back was turned to Carol and Jack. They saw only a fleeting red glow of flame as the man rummaged in the various drawers.

The match sputtered out. Muttering impatiently to himself, the man struck another. This time he appeared to find the thing for which he searched, for he gave a little chuckle, plainly audible. Paper rustled softly as he thrust something into his pocket.

His mission accomplished, the man moved stealthily back toward the stairway. He passed so closely to the wall where Carol and her brother huddled that they could have reached out and touched him. They caught a faint odor of tobacco smoke which clung to his garments.

Neither Jack nor Carol dared to move so much as a muscle until the trap door at the head of the stairway dropped into place. Above them, floor boards creaked once more, then silence fell upon the house, and they felt sure that the man had left.

Carol sagged weakly against Jack as her knees threatened to give way beneath her. Now that the danger was past, temporarily at least, she felt almost ill.

"Brace up!" Jack whispered encouragingly. "We had a narrow escape, but it's over now. I don't think he'll come back."

They waited ten minutes. During that time they heard no sound above, so Jack turned on the flashlight again.

"Let's get out of here!" he said tersely.

"The sooner the better! You have the picture and the receipts?"

A stricken expression came over Jack's face.

"They were left in the desk, Carol. When I heard that fellow coming I was so startled I dropped everything."

"Not the picture you received from Mrs. Gifford?"

Jack nodded miserably. "I had it in my hand at the time. I think I dropped it on top of the desk."

"Oh, Jack—if we've lost all our evidence—"

"Maybe that fellow overlooked it."

Frantically, they searched, but as they had feared, everything was gone. The New Haven paper, the photograph of Angela Mercier, the two receipts—all were missing.

"I don't know how I could have been so stupid," Jack accused himself. "I guess I was just too scared to realize what I was doing."

Carol was deeply disappointed over the loss since she realized that without a photograph of Angela it would be difficult to make the Mercier sisters believe the story. However, she did not blame her brother for what he had done.

"It wasn't your fault," she said generously. "The photo is gone and we may as well accept it. The main thing now is to get out of this house while the coast is clear!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### AN ALARMING LOSS

CAROL and Jack stole noiselessly up the stairway and with light extinguished, raised the trap door to cautiously peer forth into the dark attic room. It seemed deserted. They listened for several minutes, and then, satisfied that no one was moving about anywhere in the house, softly descended to the first floor.

Hurriedly they let themselves out through the same window they had entered a short time before, and, laughing in sheer relief because they were safely away from the building, raced across the alley to their parked car.

No other automobile was in the immediate vicinity nor was there any sign of the man they had encountered in the secret room.

"Who could he have been, I wonder?" Carol speculated. "I wish we had seen his face."

"In that case he'd have seen us too, and that might not have been so pleasant," Jack returned grimly. "The fellow must have been one of the conspirators. Probably when the house was abandoned, everything was gathered up hastily. Later, someone likely re-

membered about the newspaper picture and those receipts and decided to come back for them before they were found by the police."

"If only we had visited the house a few hours sooner—"

"Or if I had hung on to the evidence when it was in my hands," Jack added ruefully. "I could kick myself for that trick!"

"Even if we can't prove our story, surely the Mercier sisters will believe enough of it to make a complete investigation. It frightens me to think what may have happened to the real Angela."

"It's a case for the police all right," Jack said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should go straight to headquarters instead of to the Mercier sisters."

"They would never forgive us if we did, Jack. We must talk with them before we act. After all, it's their affair more than it is ours."

"You're right, Carol. Only if they don't act quickly it may be too late."

"We'll drive to the Mercier house without delay. Then if Sonia and Seenia refuse to do anything, we can go to the police."

Jack headed the automobile toward the French Quarter and following his sister's directions, soon drew up before the Mercier residence. They alighted and rapped on the massive door. The building appeared

dark and it was some time before old Magnolia came to answer the summons. She cautiously opened the upper panel only, holding her candle high as she stared down into their faces.

"Is dat you, Miss Scott?" she inquired dubiously.

"Yes, let us in, Magnolia. I must see Sonia at once."

The housekeeper fumbled with the latch, eventually opening the door.

"Miss Sonia go away fooh de evenin'," she announced.  
"I'se heah alone."

"But surely Seenia is at home," Carol persisted.

The colored woman shook her head. "Dey's both gone an Miss Angela too. Mistah DeForest say maybe dey get back tonight, maybe tomorrow."

"Barry DeForest?" Carol asked quickly. "What has he to do with it?"

"Mistah DeForest load all de ladies in his big limozeen and haul 'em all out to his big place in de country. He's feedin' 'em wid a seben course dinnah an all de fixins. Miss Seenia was pow'ful sickish to go so far but dat didn't make no difference to dat ole wolf!"

Carol and her brother exchanged a glance and the girl said quickly to Magnolia:

"Tell me, did you hear Mr. DeForest say anything about having the Mercier sisters sign any papers while they were at his place?"

"No, Miss, he just kept tellin' 'em what a fine time dey'd have an how dey needed to get some fresh air into de lungs."

"Where is Mr. DeForest's country home?" Carol questioned abruptly. "Do you know?"

"'Deed I does. Tarrymore Plantation is up Baton Rouge way. Not far from de old Twin Oaks place."

Carol could not believe that she had heard correctly but as she repeated the latter name, the old Negress offered an additional bit of information.

"Suah, you neveh hear o' de Twin Oaks plantation? De Davenell family lived in dat house for most seventy yeahs. Ole man Davenell die twenty yeahs ago. Since dat day de big house has stood empty—or maybe it ain't even standin' by dis time. Gone to ruin like as not."

Carol and Jack plied the colored woman with questions regarding the location of the two plantations. Although she knew the locality well, it was difficult for her to tell them how to reach either place. Her directions, although vividly expressed, were vague.

"Tell me, Magnolia did you ever hear of a plantation called North Star?" Carol inquired hopefully.

"No, Miss, I neveh did, in my born days, an I was raised near de Twin Oaks too."

Carol thanked Magnolia for the information and a few minutes later left the house with her brother.

"Now what's our move?" he asked when they were sitting in the car again.

"It's unfortunate we missed Sonia and Seenia," Carol responded, "but we were lucky to learn about Twin Oaks. Do you suppose it can be the same plantation?"

"There's an outside chance it might be."

"I guess now that the Mercier sisters are away, the only thing to do is to go to the police and tell them everything we've learned," Carol said slowly.

"And by the time they act, this attorney DeForest will have arranged the financial settlement for the fake Angela Mercier," Jack added gloomily. "Like as not the papers will all be signed tonight while the sisters are at his plantation."

"I'm afraid of it," Carol agreed. "The instant Angela receives that money, she'll disappear."

"We'll have to move fast if we queer her little game."

"I don't see what we can do, Jack—unless we drive to Tarrymore tonight."

"We could do that."

"It's a long drive and we don't know the way."

"We could probably find it by inquiring along the road."

"Mother and Dad would worry themselves sick if they get home and discover we've disappeared."

"We can drop back there and leave a note explaining where we've gone."

"And receive a good, hard lecture when we return from our wild trip!" Carol added. "But if you're game, so am I. Let's go!"

In a few minutes they reached home. As they hurried up the walk, Carol commented upon the fact that the house was dark.

"I wonder what became of Aunt Becky? She appears to have taken French leave."

"She probably thought with everyone gone, she might as well have a holiday herself," Jack replied gruffly.

They went around the house to the side door. Carol was searching for her key, when her brother tested the knob and to his surprise discovered that it turned readily.

"The door's unlocked, Carol. Aunt Becky had her nerve going away and leaving the house open."

They entered the dining room and switched on the light. Instantly their eyes were drawn to an overturned chair.

"Someone has broken in while we were away!" Carol cried.

She ran to the buffet, pulling out the various drawers. The silverware had not been touched.

Jack hastened to the adjoining room. The contents of a table drawer had been upset and papers were scattered over the floor. He called loudly for Aunt

Becky and when she did not answer knew that she was not in the house.

"Someone has ransacked the place all right," Jack muttered, "but nothing seems to be missing."

Carol had entered the room. Her gaze traveled swiftly to the battered old desk. As she had feared, it gave mute evidence of having been thoroughly plundered.

"Maybe some of Dad's papers have been stolen," Jack speculated.

Carol was concerned over a far different matter. She ran to the desk and jerked open the top drawer. Swiftly her hand explored the contents.

"My shadow stone!" she gasped, turning a distressed face toward her brother. "It's gone!"

## CHAPTER XV

### ALONG THE LEVEE

"THEN I guess that explains why the house was entered," Jack commented grimly, crossing the room to help his sister make a second search of the desk. "You probably were followed home today after you met Angela Mercier."

"I don't see how I could have been," Carol said plaintively. "Not unless it was that man I saw on the bus."

"Well, at any rate, the shadow stone seems to be gone. You should have kept it in a safer place, Carol."

"I never dreamed of anyone breaking into the house. Aunt Becky is always here. Of course tonight she would take it into her head to leave!"

"Our last bit of evidence seems to have fallen into the hands of the enemy."

Carol nodded miserably. "The worst of it is, I'm almost positive the shadow stone belongs to the real Angela Mercier. It was probably taken forcibly from her by the conspirators whose intention was to have

the other girl use it as an identification token. Sonia did not reveal the exact character of the Mercier family heirloom, but by adding two and two together, I concluded that she referred to my jade piece."

"And now this girl who is an impostor will have the required proof?"

"In the eyes of the Mercier sisters—yes. They set great store by their 'token' as they call it."

"Then it looks as if we've been bested, Carol. With all our evidence gone, what can we do?"

"We must drive to Tarrymore Plantation tonight exactly as we planned," Carol announced with determination. "I don't care if the Mercier sisters do think we're trying to interfere in their business. We can't sit quietly by and allow that dishonest girl to walk off with money which doesn't belong to her!"

"She's probably only an agent for higher-ups."\*

"That makes the affair more serious, Jack. The Mercier sisters will be stripped of half their property before they suspect that anything is wrong. I'm afraid they're rather pathetic where business is concerned."

"Their lawyer should protect them."

"Barry DeForest!" Carol retorted scornfully. "I'd never trust him to handle the situation save for his own ends. He's not as devoted to the Mercier interests as he pretends!"

Jack glanced at the living room clock.

"It's nearly nine o'clock now," he said. "If we're starting for Tarrymore Plantation, we should be traveling. Get yourself a warm sweater, Carol, while I write a note for Mother and Dad."

Carol ran upstairs to her room. By the time she returned her brother had finished the message. They propped it up on the living room table in plain sight and hastened to the automobile.

A short ride carried them to the ferry. Jack drove aboard just an instant before the gate closed. There was a loud rumble of machinery from below and the boat began to move.

Carol and Jack sat in their car, watching the lights of the city slowly recede. They stared meditatively at the swirling black water of the Mississippi and listened to the slightly discordant music of a blind violin player who gathered a few nickels and dimes before moving on to another part of the boat.

Carol glanced up at the dark sky, noticing that a few stars were straggling through rifts in the clouds. As she watched a half moon illuminated the water momentarily and then slipped behind its dark screen again.

"Want to turn back?" Jack asked abruptly.

Carol shook her head.

Presently a clanging of bells warned the motorists that land was near. Jack started the engine of his car

and after the boat had tied up at the dock, followed a long line of automobiles across the planking. He turned into the main highway leading along the high bank of the levee to the plantation country.

Carol drew her sweater more tightly about her for the night river air was cold and damp. Miles of desolate country fell behind them. They overtook few cars and met none.

Presently they were passing along fields of cotton and sugar-cane. Now and then, silhouetted in a ghostly patch of fading moonlight, a sugar-house was visible.

"I never made this drive before at night," Carol remarked, shivering. "I can't say I like it either. The country seems so desolate, so abandoned."

"Houses are few and far between," Jack agreed. "One needs plenty of gas and a dependable car on this road."

"I wish we knew exactly where we're going. I feel as if we're riding blind."

"We'll stop to make inquiry at the first likely place," Jack promised.

A little farther on they sighted the lights of a filling station. Jack drove in and while the attendant was pumping gasoline into the tank, questioned him regarding the location of Tarrymore Plantation.

"It's about thirty miles from here," the man directed.

"You keep to this main road for about twenty miles or so. Then you'll see a grove of live-oak bearded with long festoons of moss. Turn right at the gravel road which takes you to the river. Tarrymore is the third plantation.

Carol interposed a question regarding the location of Twin Oaks but the attendant had never heard of it.

Jack thanked him for the information, and they drove on again.

"At best it will be late when we reach the plantation," he commented anxiously. "Your friends may have left before we arrive."

"I imagine after making such a long trip, Seenia and Sonia will remain for the night at least. It seems strange to me that they would go to Tarrymore at all. Doesn't it seem queer to you, Jack, that Barry DeForest should invite them to his plantation just at this time?"

"I hadn't thought of it from that angle before. But it does look peculiar. Of course, he's an old friend of the Mercier sisters and for all we know they may dine there frequently."

"Seenia isn't able to travel far, Jack. She's practically an invalid. Another thing, you remember I saw that girl who claims to be Angela, calling at DeForest's home in the city."

"You said you weren't sure she actually entered the house."

"No, but I have a strong suspicion she did. I believe she went to see DeForest, hoping he would help her acquire a generous slice of the Mercier fortune."

"If DeForest is such a good friend of the Merciers, I shouldn't think the girl would get far by such tactics. Rather, she'd stand to expose her hand."

"Yes, that's probably so," Carol admitted reluctantly. "I confess I don't know what to think about it all. But from the very first it has seemed to me that DeForest was rather eager to have the Mercier sisters sign those papers and finish up the settlement in short order."

"They may not thank us for interfering."

"I don't expect thanks. But after hearing our story, if the Mercier sisters refuse to question the identity of that girl, then I'll march straight to the police."

"I think we made a mistake in not doing that when we discovered the hidden room," Jack declared.

They both lapsed into silence, watching the road. Since leaving the filling station, the speedometer registered twenty-six miles. Carol knew they must be approaching the turn-off if the attendant's directions had been correct. They passed many live-oak trees heavily draped in shrouds of gray moss, but did not come to a grove.

Realizing that time was rapidly elapsing, Jack had increased the speed of the car. Now and then it

careened unsteadily when the wheels struck a broken strip of pavement.

"Do be careful, Jack," Carol started to say, but the warning was never finished.

There came a loud report as a tire blew out and the automobile wobbled like a crazy thing in the narrow road. Jack tried desperately to keep it straight but the steering wheel was of little use. The car careened heavily into a ditch.

"Now we *are* in it!" Carol cried in exasperation when she had recovered from the severe jolt.

"In it is right," Jack echoed gloomily, forcing open the car door. "We're up to the wheel caps in old Louisiana mud."

He helped Carol out of the car. Neither had been hurt and they were relieved that the automobile did not appear damaged. However, it was deeply mired down and could never be driven out under its own power.

Jack peered up and down the road. They had not passed a house in many miles and as far as one could see ahead there were no lights.

"Perhaps a car will come along soon," Carol ventured hopefully.

"We haven't seen one in an hour. I'll have to walk to the nearest house for help, Carol. You sit in the car and wait."

"I'd rather go with you, Jack. You'll be gone such a long time and it's so quiet here—"

"Well, come along then," Jack replied gruffly. "I don't much like the idea of leaving you here alone myself."

They started down the road, staring straight ahead, seldom speaking. It seemed to Carol that they had walked at least a half mile when a little ways ahead, shimmering in the moonlight, she glimpsed a grove of oak trees.

"That must mark the turn off, Jack."

"A lot of good it will do us now. We'll be lucky if we get to Tarrymore tonight."

Coming a few minutes later to the gravel side road they paused to study it. They had decided to continue down the main highway when Carol insisted that she could see a light in the direction of the river.

"I think we'll reach help quicker, Jack, if we take this side road. We know Tarrymore Plantation can't be far away, and there are other houses along the river."

"I do believe I see a light away off," Jack agreed.  
"All right, we'll try it this direction."

They turned down the narrow road, walking rapidly. At intervals they caught a glimpse of the light, only to have it disappear. The cool, damp breeze which blew into their faces warned them that they were near the river.

"I don't believe that light comes from a house at all," Carol declared a little later. "It moves from place to place. I think it's a man carrying a lantern."

"Well, at least he can direct us to a plantation," Jack said hopefully.

Soon they drew near a long avenue of gigantic oak trees. As moonlight fell on the dark festoons of moss, casting mysterious swaying shadows, they were able to see just beyond at the river's edge, the remains of an old plantation house.

It was a single-storied structure of cypress with eight impressive white columns. The roof sagged crazily, all window glass had been shattered, and the crumbling walls were matted with a jungle-like growth of vine. At either end of the house stood twin octagonal towers of whitewashed brick, each surmounted by a weather-vane. The only sound to be heard was the incessant croaking of bullfrogs.

"It's only a deserted plantation," Jack observed in disappointment. "We can expect no help here."

"But I'm sure the light came from the direction of this house," Carol insisted. "What became of it?"

"Maybe the place is haunted," Jack said jokingly.

"Don't say things like that," Carol shivered. "I have the creeps already."

She was staring curiously at the octagonal towers, wondering for what purpose they had ever been used,

when a dog began to bark. Jack and Carol whirled about to see a giant police dog hurling himself toward them. And at the same moment, from behind the house, there appeared a man with a lantern.

The dog snarled so menacingly that Jack caught up a stick to fend him off. Not until then did the owner make any effort to call the animal.

"Down, Rudy!" he shouted. "Down! Down!"

The dog obeyed but continued to eye Carol and Jack with vicious intent. They moved a few paces back, convinced that with the slightest encouragement the animal would attack.

The man with the lantern came closer, holding it so that the light fell full upon Jack and Carol. Somewhat blinded by the beam, they were unable to make out his figure distinctly. Half-hidden by the shadows, he appeared to be a rather large hulk of a man whose cumbersome body dipped stiffly with every step. Plainly the man had a wooden leg. They could hear it grate along the hard ground whenever he put his weight on it.

His other qualities remained obscure, save one. A voice boomed out at them from the darkness, deep-toned yet with a harsh and rasping note:

"Get out of here!" he commanded. "And be quick about it or I'll set the dog on you!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN ABANDONED PLANTATION

THE police dog came whining to the heels of its master. Jack and Carol waited for no more but ran as fast as they could down the road away from the river. Not until they were fifty yards away did they pause to look back. Through the trees they could still glimpse the beam of the lantern.

"He really meant to set that dog on us too!" Carol exclaimed, breathing rapidly. "What a vicious beast!"

"Both of them!" Jack added. "That fellow with the peg leg is a tough character."

"Do you suppose he lives at the plantation? It looked completely abandoned."

Jack offered no response and they trudged on deeply depressed by their series of misfortunes. They were convinced they would spend the night along the road, when, emerging over a little knoll, Carol sighted the lights of a house only a short distance ahead.

"I can't believe my own eyes, Jack. It must be a mirage!"

A few minutes walk brought them to a large, unpainted square house. They approached with due caution but there was no dog on the premises to drive

them away. Jack rapped on the door and presently a middle-aged woman, oil lamp in hand and a timid child clinging to her skirts, peered out at them a trifle suspiciously.

Her manner immediately relaxed when she saw Carol, and after Jack had explained their mishap along the road, she became friendly.

"Do come in," she invited hospitably. "I wish I could help you out, but I'm afraid I can't. You see, I'm alone in the house. My husband went to Baton Rouge today and won't be back until tomorrow. He'd be glad to pull your car out of the ditch for you if only he were here."

"Is there another house close by?" Carol inquired as they entered the clean but barren living room.

The woman who later introduced herself as Mrs. Hawkins, smilingly shook her head.

"The nearest place is Tarrymore Plantation—that's a good eight miles from here and my husband has the car."

"We encountered a strange character only a few minutes ago," Carol remarked. She recounted the meeting with the man and dog.

"That must have been at Twin Oaks," Mrs. Hawkins rejoined.

Carol and Jack exchanged swift glances. Here indeed was interesting information.

"Twin Oaks did you say?" Carol inquired, trying to make her voice sound casual. "The plantation appeared to be abandoned."

"Oh, until quite recently, it has been. It's the old Davenell place, you know. It was deserted years ago when the river levee was moved back. That left the house standing practically at the water's edge. I've been told the river flows over the rear veranda steps now. In another year or so the house will be swept away. It's a pity for I can remember when it was a grand old plantation."

"If the house has been abandoned, why does this man with the vicious dog stay there?" Carol questioned.

"He came about two weeks ago and seemingly rented the grounds and house—although why he should choose such an unlikely place it's hard to tell. No one knows the man's real name, although he's familiarly called Peg Leg Pete. According to the rumor he intends to raise pigeons."

"Pigeons?"

"It's silly, of course. But my husband tells me he's actually fitted up one of the twin towers as a pigeon cote. He has his living quarters in the other I believe."

"He isn't very friendly to strangers," Jack remarked.

"He has nothing to do with anyone," Mrs. Hawkins

agreed. "But for that matter, no one in this neighborhood would care to associate with him. He seems like such a rough character."

"And his dog isn't exactly pleasant," Carol smiled.

"I wonder if we could use your telephone, Mrs. Hawkins?" Jack interposed. "If we could call to a garage—"

"We haven't one," the woman replied regretfully. "I'm so sorry."

"Then it begins to look as if we'll spend the night by the roadside," Jack commented.

"You must stay here," Mrs. Hawkins urged hospitably. "I have several extra rooms all ready and I'll be glad to have you. To tell the truth, I don't feel entirely safe alone at night—especially since that queer man came to live at Twin Oaks. You'll do me a favor to stay."

Jack and Carol hesitated and then after consulting briefly accepted the woman's kind offer. Despite their anxiety to reach Tarrymore Plantation they realized that under the circumstance they could not hope to get their car out of the ditch before morning. At least by remaining with Mrs. Hawkins they would have comfortable accommodations.

Carol helped their hostess prepare the rooms, and then after the woman had gone downstairs, went to

talk privately with her brother. She rapped lightly on his door and entered. Jack was standing by the window, staring out.

"Come here, Carol," he called softly. "I just saw something peculiar."

Quickly she joined him at the window which gave an outlook toward Twin Oaks. She peered out but beheld nothing unusual or disturbing.

"A rocket just shot up over by the river," Jack explained in an undertone. "I'm not sure whether it came from a boat or was sent up by someone on shore."

For some minutes the two stood by the window, silently watching.

"Maybe it was only a falling star," Carol presently commented.

"No, it was a rocket. I couldn't have been mistaken. And it came from the direction of Twin Oaks plantation."

Carol eyed her brother soberly. "It's evident that something queer is going on at that place tonight," she said. "Peg Leg Pete is involved in more serious business than pigeon raising."

Jack nodded grimly, but did not express aloud the thought which occurred to them both. Mrs. Hawkins' surprising revelation that the abandoned plantation was known as Twin Oaks had brought an instant recol-

lection of the baffling rent receipt which they had discovered in the secret room of the Peacock Shutter house.

"Three hundred dollars," Carol murmured. "I call that high rent for such a desolate wreck of a place. It's fairly clear that the plantation has been taken over as a hide-out or as a place of imprisonment for Angela Mercier."

"Peg Leg Pete must be a guard who keeps folks from prying," Jack contributed. "The pigeon raising talk is just front."

"Angela Mercier may be imprisoned in that house this very minute," Carol said tensely. "Jack, we must do something!"

"If we had our car we could go for the authorities."

"But we haven't the car, and of course there's an outside chance our deductions may be all wrong. Jack, let's sneak back to that house and see what we can discover."

"Have you by any chance forgotten the dog?" Jack inquired wryly.

"We can approach quietly and maybe he won't hear us. Are you willing to try it?"

"It's risky business, Carol, but come on, let's go."

Mrs. Hawkins looked somewhat startled as the girl and boy returned to the lower floor of the house, but made no comment as they explained they were going

for a little walk before retiring. Carol and Jack walked swiftly until they knew they must be close to Twin Oaks. They paused to arm themselves with stout sticks and then made a wide circle which brought them to the plantation from the river side.

They halted to listen. They could hear no unusual sound and there was no sign of either Peg Leg Pete or his dog.

As Mrs. Hawkins had told them, murky water flowed over the steps of the plantation veranda. The garden had long since washed into the Mississippi; a giant scraggly tree which stood close to the house was partially submerged. Carol noticed that its upper branches brushed lightly against an upper story window. She indicated this observation to her brother, suggesting that by climbing the tree they could secure a clear view of the interior of the plantation house and its surroundings.

Hand in hand they waded through the water, taking care to make no sound. Jack helped his sister into the lower branches and then scrambled up after her. From their high perch they were able to look into the upper story of the house and at the same time obtain a view of the river and the grounds in the immediate vicinity of the plantation.

"Isn't that a boat out there on the water?" Jack whispered, pointing.

It seemed to Carol that she could see a dark shadow, but it was too far away to be certain. In any case, the boat was showing no light. However, as her eyes roved toward the octagonal towers at either end of the plantation house, she noticed that the one to the east was dimly illuminated.

"That must be where Peg Leg Pete lives," she communicated to her brother. "The rest of the house is dark."

From their perch they were able to look directly into one of the large bedrooms. It was empty.

Jack crawled far out on the thick limb, and finally, to Carol's dismay, stepped through the open window into the room. Unwilling to be left behind, she quickly followed.

They huddled together in the dark room, listening. The great house seemed deserted. They tiptoed across the floor which creaked alarmingly beneath their weight, and entered an adjoining room. There were eight bedchambers, all empty. Dust was everywhere. Carol stifled a scream as a large rat scurried by to lose itself in the wall.

"It doesn't look as if the house has been used lately," Jack whispered when they had thoroughly explored the upper story. "Our theory about this place being a hide-out seems to have been wrong."

They cautiously emerged upon a long balcony at

the front of the house. At either end of the stately porch a short flight of steps connected the main building with the upper story of an octagonal tower. In the one to the east a light was visible in the lower room, but Carol and Jack could look down through the tiny uncurtained windows and see that no one was moving about. The upper room which connected with the stairs remained dark. Jack daringly proposed that they investigate it.

"If we should be caught—" Carol protested weakly.

"Old Peg Leg has taken his dog and gone off somewhere," Jack reassured her. "This is our chance to find out what's really going on here."

They moved stealthily across the connecting stairs, entering the curious shaped tower room. Immediately they became aware of a faint, rustling sound. All about them were small coops which housed large, drowsy fat pigeons.

"Wrong again," Jack murmured. "Old Peg Leg really does seem to be in the pigeon-raising business."

Carol had been examining one of the birds closely.

"These aren't ordinary birds to be sold as squab, Jack. They look like homing pigeons to me."

Before her brother could respond, they were startled to hear the muffled drone of a boat engine coming from the direction of the river. Peering from one of the round windows of the tower, they were further

disturbed to see a man with a swinging lantern walking swiftly toward the plantation house. They did not doubt that it was Peg Leg Pete returning.

"Let's get away from here before we're caught," Jack muttered.

The man with the lantern approached so rapidly that they were afraid to descend the spiral stairs leading to the lower floor of the tower. Instead they retreated across the passageway to the high balcony of the plantation house.

Peg Leg Pete, the police dog at his heels, walked directly toward the tower but did not pause. He moved swiftly around the house and disappeared.

Curious to learn his purpose, Carol and Jack crawled through an open window into the house, crossed an empty bed chamber and from there were able to command a view of the river.

They were not especially surprised to see a small houseboat gliding quietly toward an old dock not fifty yards distant from the house. Peg Leg Pete stood waiting with his lantern. As the boat grated to a landing, he caught one of the ropes and made it fast.

The vessel showed no light but for an instant before it floated into the shadow of the giant oak tree, a beam of moonlight illuminated the neatly lettered name.

"Jack!" Carol whispered excitedly. "Did you see that? It's the *North Star!*"

## CHAPTER XVII

### INSIDE THE PIGEON TOWER

BEFORE Carol and her brother fully recovered from their astonishment at learning that the *North Star* was the name of a houseboat rather than a plantation, they were treated to a second surprise.

From the boat emerged a short, squat little man with hooked nose and energetic manner. Carol instantly recognized him as the same candy vendor who had accosted her upon Mardi Gras day and in a whisper communicated this observation to her brother.

As the man leaped down on the dock, Rudy, the dog, growled menacingly but Peg Leg Pete silenced him with a harsh command.

"I wish you'd get rid of that ugly brute," the vendor muttered nervously. "He'll kill someone yet."

"Rudy's a valuable dog when he's properly handled," Peg Leg Pete replied gruffly. "I need him here. Tonight he drove off a couple of prowlers."

"Prowlers?" the other asked sharply.

"Only a girl and a boy—motorists I think."

"They weren't suspicious of anything?"

"They were only kids, I tell you. But any day some-

one may get wise to our game. I don't like this job—it's taking a lot longer to swing it than the boss promised."

"We ran into a lot of hard luck," the vendor replied. "Losing that piece of jade was a bad break all around because the old maids refused to talk turkey without it."

"I don't want you coming here with the boat," Peg Leg Pete complained. "As long as I'm here alone I'm safe because even if the police searched the dump they'd find no evidence. But if they should run into the girl—"

"They won't, Pete. With luck we'll wind up everything tonight and as soon as the money is in our hands, dispose of the girl. As you say, she's dangerous."

"How can you wind up the business without the jade piece?"

"Take a look at this, Pete."

The vendor withdrew a small object from his pocket and offered it to the other man for inspection. Carol and Jack were unable to glimpse it but they knew the trinket must be the shadow stone, stolen that very day from the desk at home.

"That's what brought me here tonight," the vendor said with satisfaction. "We traced the girl and found the stone. Now we'll send word to Tarrymore that we have it, and await orders."

Jack and Carol were unable to understand Peg Leg Pete's reply, but they saw the pair walk away in the direction of the lighted octagonal tower.

"This is our chance to search the *North Star*," Carol whispered eagerly. "Angela Mercier may be imprisoned aboard."

She started to crawl through the window, intending to descend by means of the accommodating tree, but Jack pulled her back.

"The boat is guarded," he warned, indicating a dark figure barely visible near the doorway of the small cabin.

Carol and her brother were too far away to see clearly but they both thought the person who sat motionless and alert was a fat Negress.

"Angela is probably locked up in the cabin," Carol reasoned. "But while that colored woman stays there on guard how can we find out?"

"Right now we can't. But we may be able to learn what old Peg Leg and his pal are doing."

They quietly returned to their former post of vantage, the balcony of the plantation house. They reached it in time to see Peg Leg Pete and his companion enter the octagonal tower and mount the spiral stairway to the second floor where the pigeons were housed.

"They're sending word by means of the homing

birds," Carol guessed shrewdly. "That's why old Peg Leg has kept them here."

The candy vendor had indicated by his conversation that word was to be sent to Tarrymore that the shadow stone had been recovered. He had intimated too that a return message would be expected. Carol's brows knitted thoughtfully as she tried to reason it out. While she was not especially well informed regarding the habits of carrier pigeons, she knew that when released they always flew back to the home roost, the place where they were fed. It was fairly evident that the master of Tarrymore Plantation or someone upon the premises maintained a pigeon cote similar to the one at Twin Oaks. Otherwise, two way communication would be impossible.

"That's how they're doing it, Carol," Jack whispered, interrupting her thoughts. "There goes the pigeon now!"

Carol turned in time to see Peg Leg Pete open one of the round windows of the tower. She caught a flash of white as he released the bird. It soared upward and was lost to view.

"We won't have long to wait for a reply," Peg Leg Pete remarked to his companion as he moved away from the window. The other's response was lost to the two listeners.

The men sat down, stretching themselves out comfortably. Peg Leg Pete began to smoke a pipe. It was evident to Carol and Jack that they intended to remain in the tower until a return message was received from Tarrymore Plantation.

"If only we could intercept that order when it arrives!" Carol whispered, thinking aloud. "Not only would we learn the plans of the gang, but we'd have evidence in writing from the chief himself. Evidence which would stand up in court and bring a conviction!"

They stared across at the lighted tower, wishing that something would cause the two men to abandon their post. Yet they knew that this was a futile hope.

"We must get that message some way," Jack said determinedly. "Carol, if I could draw those men away from the tower just as the pigeon wings in with the reply from Tarrymore, do you think you could sneak across the stairway and capture it before they return?"

"I'm willing to try, Jack. But how could you lure them away?"

"I'll make some sort of disturbance down by the river on the other side of the house."

"But that's dangerous, Jack."

"Your part will be risky too. But if we're to gain our evidence we'll have to take a chance."

"And work fast," Carol added.

They laid careful plans, agreeing upon a meeting place down the road after they had accomplished their purpose.

"It's that dog you must watch out for," Carol warned anxiously. "If he scents you, he'll be certain to attack. Be cautious in whatever you do."

"I will," Jack promised.

They separated, the boy lowering himself over the balcony and dropping lightly to the ground. He hid himself in the shrubbery, there to await his sister's signal. Carol in the shadow of one of the balcony pillars, alternately riveted her eyes upon the sky and the two men who waited in the octagonal room. Time passed slowly.

She was beginning to grow weary of the vigil when at last she glimpsed a dark object flying toward the open tower window. It circled and she knew it must be a carrier pigeon. Instantly, she raised her arm to signal Jack.

Immediately, there was a loud commotion below. Startled by the noise, the two men ran down the spiral stairs and out-of-doors. They flashed their lantern about but Jack had disappeared into the shrubbery. Already he was some distance away, but in hurrying toward the river he deliberately thrashed through the bushes, making as much disturbance as possible.

"Someone has been spying on us!" Peg Leg Pete

muttered to his companion. "Here, Rudy, track him down!"

Carol's heart sank within her as she saw the dog take to the trail. But she dared not consider her brother's predicament for she had daring work of her own to accomplish. The moment that the two men followed the dog into the bushes, she darted across the passageway which joined the balcony with the tower room.

The carrier pigeon had not yet gone into his coop. She caught the bird, eagerly exploring under the wings. To her delight she found a small cartridge harnessed there, and quickly transferred it to her pocket. There was no time to read the message. She would do that later.

Down the spiral stairs she sped, bestowing scarcely a glance at the tiny ground-floor room which evidently provided temporary living quarters for Peg Leg Pete.

An indistinct murmur of voices reached her ears, and she grew alarmed for fear the two men were returning. Darting from the tower, she dodged into the trees, and when she was a few yards away ran swiftly toward the meeting place upon which she and Jack previously had agreed.

Reaching the appointed site by the road, she gazed anxiously about for her brother. He was not there. Carol was disturbed since she had expected that he

might arrive ahead of her. He would come in a moment, of course, but any delay in getting away from the plantation now would prove dangerous.

Slipping back into the shadows, she sat down on a half-rotten log to wait. Thinking of the message which reposed so snugly in her pocket, she took out the cartridge and removed the tiny roll of paper. Only by standing directly in the beam of moonlight could she make out the writing. The message read:

"Good work. Will come in person for jade trinket and to give final instructions about A.M."

"Could those initials stand for Angela Mercier?" Carol mused. "I'm certain the girl is being held captive somewhere near here."

Returning the paper to its container and secreting the latter upon her person, she began to watch the road again, wondering why Jack did not come.

As the minutes elapsed and still there was no sign of him, her fears increased. She knew he might have been tracked down by Rudy. If he had been captured —but she would not consider that possibility.

Another ten minutes passed. Carol could no longer make herself hope that Jack was coming. Something had gone wrong. She was certain of it now.

While she was considering what to do, she was startled to hear the roar of an approaching automobile. Carol turned to stare down the road. A car without

lights was coming toward Twin Oaks plantation.

"I might try to stop the driver and ask for help," the girl thought.

Then she recognized the stupidity of such action and stepped farther back into the bushes. This lonely road was seldom frequented by motorists, especially at such a late hour of the night. In all probability the driver of the oncoming car was none other than the ring-leader of the conspirators, the person from Tarrymore Plantation who had informed Peg Leg Pete of his intention to visit Twin Oaks.

"I have a suspicion who it will be too," Carol thought grimly. "But I must gain absolute proof."

As the car drove past, she caught only a fleeting glimpse of the driver's face. Disappointed by this, she watched until the automobile turned in at Twin Oaks Plantation.

"I knew it!" she murmured under her breath. "That man is the one who received the carrier pigeon message and he's come in person for the shadow stone. Oh, I must learn his identity!"

She hesitated only momentarily before starting back toward the plantation. It was dangerous to retrace her steps, she knew, but the temptation could not be resisted. Nor was she motivated by curiosity alone. She was worried about Jack.

The automobile had drawn up not far from the east

tower of the plantation house and its appearance was the signal for Rudy to dart from the bushes, snarling savagely.

"Get away, you brute!" the driver exclaimed angrily.

From her hiding place by the road, Carol saw Peg Leg Pete hurry toward the car, coming from the direction of the river. He called sharply to the police dog, commanding it to lie down. Only then did the driver dare alight.

He kept his back turned toward Carol so that she was unable to see his face. Then he moved slightly and the light from Peg Leg Pete's lantern shone full upon him. Only for a fleeting instant did he remain in the beam, but in that instant Carol had confirmed her suspicion.

The man was Barry DeForest.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### CAPTURED

THE voices of the two men reached Carol in half-muffled tones. She moved closer that she might hear what they were saying.

"It's risky business coming here tonight, Pete," the lawyer said gruffly. "I wouldn't have chanced it only I had to get that jade piece. You have it safe?"

"Jake has it with him. He's around here somewhere searching for a snooper."

"A snooper?" DeForest demanded sharply.

"Someone came prowling around the tower tonight. The dog lost the trail or we'd have caught him."

Carol's heart leaped joyfully at this scrap of information. Jack was still safe!

"You bungling nitwit!" the lawyer exclaimed furiously. "Why did you let the fellow escape? Do you want to land us all in jail?"

"It wasn't my fault he got away," Peg Leg Pete retorted sullenly. "Anyway, you're not the one who is taking the big risk in this business. Jake and I have been doing all the work—and what do we get out of it?"

"You'll have your cut tonight or tomorrow at the latest. We have these old maids eating out of our hand now. They're ready to sign just as soon as they get the jade piece. I'll have their names on the dotted line tonight and as soon as the banks open in the morning, the money will be ours. You and Jake have done your work and can clear out right away."

"What will we do with the girl? We can't turn her loose or she'll spill everything."

"I've arranged that," DeForest answered. "She takes an extended trip to South America. A motor boat will meet the *North Star* down the river and transfer the girl to a banana ship which sails at dawn. That should be the end of Angela Mercier and our troubles. If she ever gets back to this country, any claim she may make will sound preposterous."

"You seem to have it all figured out," Peg Leg Pete commented, not without admiration. "But if you slip up on the money part—"

"I won't," DeForest said impatiently. "You and Jake will have your share tomorrow. If it hadn't been for that prying Scott girl, this deal wouldn't have dragged on the way it did. Now where is the jade trinket?"

"I'll get it from Jake."

"All right, but be quick. I've no time to waste. If those stupid sisters take it into their heads to go to bed

before I get back to Tarrymore, then we'll be held up until morning waiting for them to sign the papers."

"I'll find Jake right away," Peg Leg Pete responded, moving off.

He took the lantern with him and Carol thought that the time was opportune for a retreat. She was deeply excited over her discovery that Barry DeForest directed the plot against the Mercier sisters and was eager to communicate her findings to Jack.

However, before the girl could move from her hiding place, a heavy hand was laid on her shoulder. She whirled about to find herself gazing directly into the surly face of Jake, the candy vendor.

"So, we find the prowler at last!" he exclaimed.  
"Come out here!"

He pulled her roughly from the protection of the bushes. Carol struggled furiously for a moment, but quickly realized that she was no match in strength for the powerfully built man.

Peg Leg Pete, hearing the disturbance, hastily retraced his steps, bringing the lantern, and Barry DeForest joined the group. The light was flashed full in Carol's face.

"Well, if it isn't my little friend, the Scott girl," DeForest said in a soft, velvety tone, but his voice had a quality which chilled Carol.

"She's the one who has caused us so much trouble,"

the candy vendor informed. "If it hadn't been for her—"

"I know," the attorney interrupted. He smiled coldly as he turned again to Carol. "You are not a very bright young lady, Miss Scott, or you would have heeded our warning. You had every opportunity to return the jade trinket and keep out of this affair. Instead you choose to spy and run with your findings to the Mercier sisters. Now you must pay for your folly."

Carol did not reply but her gaze as it swept Barry DeForest revealed the depth of her contempt.

"She's the same one who came snooping around the plantation earlier in the evening," Peg Leg Pete informed. "There were two of them—a boy."

"Then he's probably somewhere around the grounds," DeForest said tersely. "Make a thorough search."

"If he's still here, Rudy will get him," Peg Leg answered grimly.

Whistling to the dog, he limped away into the shadows.

"What do we do with the girl?" Jake, the vendor inquired.

"Take her aboard the *North Star*," DeForest ordered. "I think Miss Scott might enjoy a long sea voyage."

"But will Captain Primston take two passengers—?"

"It's your business to see that he does," DeForest snapped. "He can't afford to refuse—he's too deeply involved. But if he should, you know how to handle him."

"We'll need an extra passport."

"Primston will know how to avoid that difficulty," the attorney said impatiently. "He can smuggle her off the ship at some out-of-the-way port."

During the brief discussion, Carol had been trying to think of some way to forestall her fate. She knew that somewhere down the river, the men intended to put her aboard a speedboat which in turn would contact an ocean going vessel. By dawn she would be beyond the aid of her friends, far out to sea, bound for South America!"

She considered appealing to Barry DeForest for more generous treatment but realized it would be a waste of breath. Despite his fine manners and excellent education, the man was at heart cruel and ruthless. She could expect no mercy at his hands.

"I must bid you good evening now," DeForest said a moment later with elaborate, mocking politeness. "I trust you will have a pleasant voyage."

"We may meet again," Carol retorted.

"Possibly, but I doubt it, Miss Scott," the attorney smiled. "You see, after tonight I too may depart from

New Orleans. The city palls upon me and I shall look forward to a change of climate. When my—ah, shall we say business affairs—are settled I shall be very well fixed. I look forward to a quiet, retired life."

"Have you no honor at all?" Carol cried scathingly. "To cheat and betray two old ladies who have always regarded you as their friend and protector!"

DeForest scowled. Turning curtly aside, he spoke to the vendor in an undertone, issuing a few terse orders. Carol saw the latter hand the attorney a small object which she took to be the shadow stone.

With the two men momentarily distracted, she thought she saw an opportunity to make a sudden break for freedom. She had not counted upon the vendor's alertness. As she tried to jerk free, his grip tightened.

"Oh, no you don't!" he chuckled.

"Take her aboard the boat and lock her up," DeForest commanded. "We're wasting too much time."

The attorney walked rapidly to his car, which had been parked among the trees a short distance away, and without turning on the headlights, drove off.

"Come along," the vendor ordered, giving Carol a slight push.

As he compelled her to walk to the river, the girl strained to hear some sound which might reveal that

Jack was lurking in the vicinity. She felt certain he had not been captured and while she feared to have him linger near the plantation lest he too fall into the hands of the enemy, she harbored a desperate hope that he might have learned of her plight.

From far down the shore, the police dog began to bark.

"Rudy's picked up the trail of your friend," the vendor announced in satisfaction. "It won't be long now!"

They had reached the water's edge where loomed the dark hulk of the *North Star*. The vendor's grip on Carol's arm did not relax as he shoved her aboard.

"Who's dere?" a low voice demanded.

"Jake," the vendor responded briefly. "It's all right. I've brought you another girl to guard. See that she doesn't escape."

A fat, sullen-eyed negress who had been sitting by the door of the cabin, emerged from the shadow to peer curiously at Carol. She smirked as she relieved the vendor of her custody.

"You're hurting me!" Carol cried, as the woman's fingers pressed cruelly into her flesh.

"Dat nothing to what I do if you try to git away," the negress retorted.

She dragged Carol across the tiny deck, and unlocking the door of the cabin, pushed the girl into the

dark room. Carol stumbled forward, crashing against a wall. The key turned in the lock. There was a murmur of voices just outside the door, and then silence.

Slowly, Carol picked herself up from the floor. Until now she had borne up well, but as the full realization of her plight came upon her, she was filled with a bitter, uncontrollable rage.

Groping for the door knob, she jerked it with all her strength.

"It's no use," said a quiet voice from the other side of the room. "If you keep on, they'll only beat and abuse us both!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### ABOARD THE HOUSEBOAT

HEARING the voice, Carol turned swiftly. For the first time she noticed a girl standing by the tiny window of the stuffy little cabin. In the dark her features were undiscernible but she was tall and slender. Carol was confident it was the same person who had dropped the note from the window of the Peacock Shutter house.

"You are Angela Mercier?" she asked, very low.

"Yes," the other answered. "How did you know my name?"

Carol explained briefly how she had been drawn into the tangled affairs of the Mercier sisters. Convinced that she had met a true friend at last, Angela in turn revealed all the distressing things which had happened to her since her departure from New Haven.

"I was met at the railroad station by two men who claimed to be cousins of Sonia and Seenia," she related. "They took me away in a taxi. I began to grow suspicious and tried to leap out but they caught me and took me to that terrible old shack."

"The House of the Peacock Shutters," Carol supplied.

"I don't know what it's called, but it was a wretched, dirty place. This same old Negress who guards the houseboat, kept constant watch over me. First of all, she searched my luggage, taking valuable papers, clothing and a certain jade trinket."

"The shadow stone," Carol murmured.

"Then you already know about it?"

"Not everything, but it has drawn me into plenty of trouble," Carol responded. "Do go on with your story."

"Several times I attempted to escape. Always I failed. Then one afternoon—it seems ages ago—I heard voices in the yard. The Negress had left me alone for a few minutes. I dragged my cot up to the window and looked out. When I saw you and that boy looking at the house, I scribbled a note and hurled it through the pane. That brought the Negress back in a hurry, and she beat me severely. I still carry bruises about the arms and shoulders."

"Then what happened?" Carol inquired eagerly. "When my brother and I returned with the police, the house appeared empty."

"The colored woman forced me down into a secret room. She tied me up and put a gag over my mouth so I couldn't cry out for help. We stayed there for

hours until the police had gone. Late at night those same two men I mentioned, came for us."

"Can you describe them?"

Angela had made careful observations during her imprisonment and was able to furnish accurate details regarding the appearance of her various guards. Carol could not place one of the men but she felt certain that the other was Jake, the vendor.

Curious to learn if Barry DeForest had revealed himself in any way, she described the attorney for Angela.

"He never came to the house," the girl replied, "and I doubt that he's been aboard this boat."

"DeForest is probably too shrewd to incriminate himself," Carol said. "But I feel confident he is the one who brewed the entire plot."

She remained silent a moment, thinking, and then, realizing that she had interrupted Angela's story, urged the girl to continue.

"There's very little more to tell. After the police left the house I was smuggled out at night and taken aboard this boat. After that I lost all track of time. I have no idea where we are now. You see, I've been kept in a darkened room. I do know we lay at anchor for several days."

"Very likely right in New Orleans," Carol commented. "Jake had to secure the shadow stone which

he lost through a silly blunder. Probably the boat remained at anchor while he tried to regain the trinket."

"The jade piece was taken from me the very first day, shortly after I was spirited away from the railroad station."

"There was a slight slip," Carol smiled. "Your abductors, due to a mistake of identity, lost possession of the stone and have been trying to recover it ever since. It seems to be essential to their plans."

"Without it I doubt they'll be able to acquire any of the Mercier property. Of course, that is their intention. I've known from the first I wasn't being held for ransom. How stupid I was to fall into the clutches of such a gang!"

From all that Angela had related, Carol was of the opinion that her new acquaintance was anything but stupid. The girl was both alert and courageous. Together they might find a means of escape from the houseboat if they acted quickly.

"We must think of some way to get out of here!" Carol said urgently. "The kidnapers plan to put us aboard an ocean going steamer tonight. We'll be beyond all help then."

"There's no way to escape," Angela replied hopelessly. "That Negress sits always at the door. She's as strong as an ox too."

"Perhaps if we made a disturbance to draw her in here and then both fell upon her at once—"

"She would be too wary. I have tried everything. She will only punish us for the attempt."

Carol moved to the tiny window and tried to look out. It was barred, she discovered, and covered from the outside. The opening itself was too small to allow even a small person to squeeze through. Escape was impossible there.

"Jack is our only hope," she thought. "And I'm afraid of what may have happened to him. He can't know I'm a prisoner aboard this boat or he'd be trying to rescue me."

A slight jar of the boat threw both Carol and Angela off balance. They clutched one another to keep from falling.

"We're moving," Angela observed.

They became aware of men's voices just outside the door, and Carol recognized the tones of both Jake and Peg Leg Pete. The two had boarded the boat, intending to abandon Twin Oaks as Barry DeForest had advised. Had they captured Jack? Carol was inclined to believe that her brother had eluded his pursuers. But what had become of him? Why had he failed to meet her at the appointed place along the road?

"Only desperate measures will save us now," she

said quietly to Angela. "We're on our way to meet the banana steamer."

"I'm sorry I've involved you in my sorry affairs. If I hadn't dropped that note—"

"We're not defeated yet," Carol interrupted grimly. "Can you swim, Angela?"

"Not very well. I'd never dare risk it in this treacherous river even if we could break free."

It seemed to Carol that their last hope was slipping away. The river was wide at this point and she felt certain the *North Star* would take the deep channel far from shore. Even for her that meant a long swim in the event she could escape from the cabin and leap overboard. It was sheer torture to remain idle and yet there seemed nothing that either of them could do save keep alert for any unexpected opportunity which might present itself.

The girls huddled together on Angela's cot, listening to the monotonous rumble of the boat engine. At intervals, Carol arose and paced the floor. The darkness grew almost intolerable.

"How do you endure it, Angela?" she cried. "You are so calm."

"I felt the same as you—at first. I am growing accustomed to it now."

"I'll never accept it—never!" Carol exclaimed.

Fairly beside herself, she rushed to the door and

beat upon it with her fists. It was a futile thing to do she knew, and yet strangely, her action proved effective.

The door suddenly opened. A light gleamed in Carol's face. Even though blinded, she made a wild dash for freedom. She was caught roughly by the arm and flung backward.

"Oh, no you don't!"

It was the voice of Jake and just behind him Carol glimpsed Peg Leg Pete and the stout Negress. Jake entered the cabin, closing the door after him. His flashlight illuminated the dingy room.

"Just a word of warning," he said gruffly. "You're far out on the river now beyond the help of your friends. It will do you no good to make a disturbance. Unless you both keep quiet, you'll be gagged and bound. Which do you choose?"

"I'll remain quiet," Angela said.

"How about you?" Jake asked looking at Carol.

She did not answer. She was listening. She thought she heard the faint, far-away drone of a speedboat. The sound grew steadily louder, indicating that the craft rapidly approached the *North Star*, yet Jake, the vendor, did not indicate by his expression that he was aware of the motor's low hum.

Carol wondered if it could be the boat which had been ordered by Barry DeForest to transport Angela

from houseboat to steamer. There was just an outside chance that it might be a pleasure craft or a river patrol boat. In that case—

"Speak up!" Jake ordered sharply. "Will you keep quiet or must I gag you?"

Carol's response took the form of action. Catching the man completely off guard, she struck the light from his hand and bounded past him. The door had not been locked. Flinging it open, she hurled herself past the old Negress who had moved a few paces from her usual post.

The oncoming speedboat had drawn closer now. Its powerful headlights made a long path of light across the water. Straight toward the *North Star* it bore, the prow cutting a great wall of foam, and leaving in its wake a series of high, swift-moving waves.

Peg Leg Pete came toward Carol from the other side of the vessel. Observing the approach of the speedboat he seemed to hesitate, and the girl heard his muffled exclamation.

Carol had no time to debate her next move. Actually, she had no choice. To remain aboard the *North Star* meant certain capture and punishment. Her one chance lay with the speedboat, and there the odds were against her. Even if she were not run down in the dark, the occupants might be aligned with the DeForest interests.

A beam of light played for a moment over the deck. Carol frantically waved her arms, screaming for help.

Peg Leg Pete leaped toward her with a cry of rage, but he was too late. Carol dived overboard into the swirling black water and with powerful strokes swam straight toward the oncoming boat.

## CHAPTER XX

### ANGELA'S INHERITANCE

CAROL feared that either by accident or design the speedboat intended to run her down. Then the powerful motor was throttled, and as a spotlight played for an instant upon her, the boat swerved slightly aside.

Carol knew that she had been seen. She turned on her back and floated with the current. The boat drifted alongside and she saw dark faces peering down at her from the deck. Then a familiar voice called:

"Hold on, Sis! We'll have you in a minute!"

Carol's heart leaped with hope. It was Jack's voice. A moment later two men hauled her over the side into the boat. Simultaneously, a shot rang out and she heard the shout:

"Ahoy, *North Star!* Stand by to be searched!"

"Is this a government boat?" Carol questioned her brother. "If it is, tell the officers that Angela Mercier is held a prisoner aboard the *North Star*."

"They know already," Jack responded. "I'll explain everything when there's time. Right now we'd better

duck into the cabin until the fracas is over. There's apt to be shooting."

Actually, the occupants of the *North Star* offered no resistance when the boat manned by local authorities came alongside. They knew it would be useless to attempt to run from the faster craft and in men they were greatly outnumbered. Peg Leg Pete, the Negress, Jake, and a man Carol had never seen before, were stripped of their weapons and handcuffed. Angela was brought safely aboard the speedboat to join her friends.

"Barry DeForest, the real culprit, is still at large," Carol said urgently to her brother. "We must get him at Tarrymore Plantation before he forces the Mercier sisters to sign away any property."

Her remark was overheard by an officer.

"That shouldn't be difficult," he said. "We're within view of the plantation now. See those lights down the river? That's Tarrymore."

While the speedboat, with the prisoners aboard, plied swiftly toward the plantation, Jack briefly explained all that had transpired after he had left his sister.

"That dog, Rudy, took up my trail and to throw him off the scent I was forced to wade through shallow water along the river," he related. Then I hid for awhile until the search quieted down. I was

starting to rejoin you when I noticed a car coming down the road.

"Barry DeForest," Carol supplied.

"Yes, I hid in the trees and heard him talking with Jake. About that time you were captured. I knew I could never rescue you from the houseboat without help. It was too well guarded. I watched my chance and hid in the rumble of DeForest's car. I let him haul me away, thinking we were going to Tarrymore. We stopped at a filling station on the way which suited my purpose even better. I climbed out and after DeForest had driven on, telephoned for the authorities."

"That was clever work," Carol praised.

"I was sure the *North Star* planned to contact another boat downstream because I overheard DeForest's orders. We were searching the channel when we saw you leap overboard. Then we knew we had the right boat."

"You came just in time, Jack. I had given up all hope of a rescue."

"When we catch DeForest we'll have done a pretty good night's work."

Carol frowned thoughtfully.

"Jack, it may not be so easy to capture him."

"Why?" the boy demanded bluntly. "If he's still at Tarrymore—"

"DeForest is shrewd and clever. Peg Leg Pete and Jake stand convicted because Angela was found on the boat, but DeForest has been careful from the first not to incriminate himself."

"But we know he's guilty."

"Of course we do, Jack. But will our story stand against his? Don't forget that Sonia and Seenia trust him implicitly."

One of the officials who had overheard the conversation, joined the couple to offer his opinion.

"Miss Scott is right," he said. "We know this fellow DeForest. He's as slippery as an eel—we'll have to be cautious about making any accusations we can't prove. He'd haul us all into court claiming false arrest."

"Why not anchor off Tarrymore Plantation and allow Jack, Angela and myself to go ashore alone?" Carol proposed after a moment's thought. "We'll talk to DeForest and the Mercier sisters, and confront them with our evidence. Then at the proper moment, come in with your men and arrest that girl who has impersonated Angela. I have a plan which I think may work out and if it does DeForest should fall into our net."

Carol's suggestion was acceptable to the officers, and after some discussion was adopted. The speedboat quietly moored at the Tarrymore dock. Jack, Carol

and Angela disembarked and hurried up the path to the house, noting as they went a long row of coops which they felt certain housed carrier pigeons similar to those kept at Twin Oaks.

Carol rapped sharply on the door of the house. A colored servant presently came, opening it a tiny crack.

"What you want here?" she demanded suspiciously.

"We should like to see Mr. DeForest."

"He ain't here."

"Oh, yes, he is," Carol retorted confidently. "Let us in."

As the woman tried to close the door in their faces, Jack pushed her aside, forcing an entrance. The three filed through a long hall and at the far end saw a light burning in the library. They could hear the low hum of voices.

"I really don't see the need of rushing this matter through tonight, Barry," Sonia was saying in a weary, irritated tone. "If you insist I suppose we may as well sign and put an end to the matter."

Carol who was slightly in the lead, appeared in the doorway.

"Don't sign anything just yet, Miss Mercier," she said clearly.

Her gaze traveled swiftly about the luxuriously furnished room. Sonia and Seenia, the latter looking

wan and ill, were seated at the desk, legal papers spread out in front of them. Just behind hovered Barry DeForest. The girl who claimed to be Angela Mercier sat stiffly in a straight-back chair. They were all staring. The attorney was the first to recover.

"Miss Scott, I believe?" he inquired with a calm politeness which amazed Carol. "This is indeed a pleasant surprise. I do not think I have met your friends."

"Then I should like to present Angela Mercier," Carol replied with a cold smile.

"It's a lie! I am Angela!" The girl in the straight-back chair sprang toward Carol, her face convulsed with anger and fear.

DeForest caught her by the arm, forcing her back a pace. He was still smiling and his voice was steady when he spoke, yet his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Let me handle this, my dear. Of course you are Angela. We do not doubt your identity—not for a moment."

Sonia had been staring at Carol but now her eyes wandered to Jack and then encompassed the face of the girl who stood between them. She arose unsteadily, gripping the desk for support.

"You do look remarkably like my brother Henri," she murmured. "Seenia, do you notice it? She has the same eyes—the hair—her manner of standing—"

"Nonsense!" DeForest interrupted sharply. "Don't allow yourself to be taken in so easily. This girl is an imposter brought here to act a part. What credentials—what proof does she have?"

"Nearly all of it was stolen," Angela answered quietly. "Since the day of my arrival in New Orleans I have been held a prisoner."

DeForest smiled broadly, tauntingly.

"My dear young lady, you cannot expect us to believe such an outlandish statement."

"Let her tell her story, Barry," Seenia commanded suddenly in a shrill voice. "I want to hear it."

With a shrug of his shoulders, the attorney retreated to a chair. While Angela related all that had befallen her since the day she had been spirited from the railway station, he listened attentively, a scornful smile playing over his face. Now and then he glanced reassuringly at the girl who huddled beside him in the high-backed chair.

"This is all very interesting," he said coldly, when Angela had finished, "but your story does not hang together. If it had a grain of truth, you would be able to support it with tangible evidence."

"Just a minute, Barry," Sonia interposed quietly. "I believe this girl is telling the truth."

"My dear Sonia—do be reasonable—"

"Don't interrupt, please, Barry. Seenia and I have

a way of testing this girl's story. The family heirloom—”

“I have it!” cried the one who called herself Angela. “See!”

From a pocket of her dress she drew forth the jade shadow stone which had been stolen that day from Carol's desk.

“But less than an hour ago you could not find it,” Sonia reminded her.

“I searched my handbag again,” the girl said glibly. “It had slipped down between the folds of a letter.”

“And do you know the significance of this piece?” Seenia inquired.

“Oh, yes, when you hold it just right it makes a strange shadow—the face of a man.”

“The face of a man,” Sonia repeated, picking up the jade piece to scrutinize it. “And can you read the inscription?”

“Of course. ‘I will defend the right.’”

Seenia and Sonia looked at one another and then their eyes roved to Angela Mercier who had remained silent during this brief interchange.

“It is your turn now,” Sonia said. “What do you have to say?”

“Only that this girl is an imposter,” Angela answered clearly. “And of course the jade piece is not the real family heirloom—not the stone which my

father took with him when he ran away from home years ago."

Carol, wondering if she had heard correctly, turned to regard the girl in amazement. Seenia and Sonia were nodding and smiling.

"I will show you the genuine trinket and explain about the other," Angela added.

She took a penknife from the desk and deliberately ripped out the hem of her dress. From the fold she drew forth a small stone, very similar in character to the other piece. Yet when she laid it on the desk even a novice could tell that it was the better quality of jade.

"And the significance of your piece?" Sonia asked softly.

"It has been in the Mercier family for many generations and according to tradition originally was a gift from Philippe, duke of Orleans, regent for Louis XV. The stone has the ability to cast a shadow—the profile of a woman. The inscription reads: 'Gardez la foi.'—Keep the Faith."

"And now tell us the meaning of this other stone," Sonia urged.

"My father always feared that the genuine family heirloom might be lost or stolen," Angela explained. "He kept it in a safety deposit box, but so many persons asked to see it that finally he decided to have an

imitation made. He did not wish the two trinkets to be exactly alike and so had the imitation engraved with a different inscription and had it cut in such a shape that it reproduced the shadow of a man's face instead of a woman's.

"Undesirable publicity resulted when the newspapers learned that I was to inherit a share of the Mercier property," Angela continued. "From the first I was uneasy lest the identity token be stolen. Then, despite my caution, I fell into the trap laid for me. Both trinkets were in my possession. I merely sewed the genuine piece into the hem of my skirt. My captors found only the imitation when they searched me and naturally took it to be the Mercier identity token."

"I believe your story—every word of it," Sonia said, her voice husky with emotion. "You have revealed facts which only a member of the family could know. This other girl is the imposter!"

Barry DeForest seemed stunned by the words, but he quickly recovered his usual poise.

"It is an amazing story," said he smoothly. "I confess I am dumfounded." He turned contritely to the Mercier sisters. "I trust you understand my position. I had never met your niece. I accepted this other girl upon faith, and since her credentials appeared bona fide, sponsored her. If I have made a mistake I did

so believing that I was acting in your interests."

"Oh, Barry, don't blame yourself," Seenia said kindly. "We've known you too many years to question your integrity."

The girl who had claimed the Mercier name, sprang angrily to her feet. She faced Barry DeForest with flashing eyes.

"If you think you can crawl out of this and let me take the rap, you can guess again! I'll tell what I know!"

DeForest, with a shrug, gazed imploringly at the Mercier sisters.

"This is to be expected," he said resignedly. "The girl has no gratitude and certainly no honor. I tried to help her, believing her to be Angela Mercier. Now that she has been exposed, she turns upon me, hoping to involve us both in her dishonorable scheme."

Carol smiled scornfully. While the others had talked, she had been examining the papers on the desk. She now offered one of the documents to Sonia.

"Tell me, is this Mr. DeForest's handwriting?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then will you look at this paper please."

She took from her pocket the crumpled message which had been carried by the pigeon from Tarrymore Plantation to Twin Oaks. Sonia stared at the note a long while before she spoke.

"Why, I don't understand—I can't believe—yes, it is the same writing!"

"The evidence is very damaging to Mr. DeForest," Carol said quietly. "In my opinion it proves him to be the instigator of the plot to gain Angela's money."

"Let me see that paper!" DeForest cried, for the first time losing his composure.

He started across the room only to pause midway. Several officers of the law had entered the library door.

"Spare yourself the trouble, DeForest," said one curtly. "We'll keep that little paper ourselves to show the judge."

"This is an outrage!" the lawyer fumed. "Mind, you shall pay for this insult. And pay dearly."

For several minutes DeForest alternately threatened the officers and pleaded innocence, but for once in his life he found himself confronted with a situation from which his glib tongue could not extract him. Together with the girl, well known to police as Sadie Marlowe, he was led away.

Sonia and Seenia were deeply troubled by the entire affair. It was difficult for them to accept the evidence because they had trusted DeForest. Not for a moment did they question that Angela was their true niece for her resemblance to Henri Mercier was unmistakable, yet they harbored a pathetic hope that

Barry DeForest would prove himself innocent of the accusations against him.

It was many weeks before they resigned themselves to the bitter truth—that the man they had trusted had systematically enriched himself from their estate. He had grown bolder with the years, and upon learning of the Mercier sisters' intention of sharing their fortune with a lost niece, had determined upon one final coup which would leave him well situated for life.

The trial of the culprits was a sore ordeal for the sisters, but their testimony was needed by the state so they suffered through the distasteful publicity and harassment with fortitude. After DeForest and the various agents employed by him, had been convicted and sentenced, they retired to their ancient home in the French quarter, there to resume their accustomed quiet life.

Soon after the stirring scenes at Tarrymore Plantation, Carol received a daintily perfumed note in the finely formed chirography of a departed day. Sonia and Seenia were insistent that she take tea with them.

The sisters were a bit excited when Magnolia brought the steaming silver pot, and Seenia announced in a tremulous voice that she had a surprise in store after tea. Her hand quivered and she very nearly spilled the brew in Angela's lap.

"Oh, give it to her now, Aunt Seenia," the girl laughed. "You're as nervous as a canary."

At this impertinence, Seenia arose and took a familiar object from the desk. It was the shadow stone, the same jade trinket which had brought Carol so many exciting experiences. Seenia smiled warmly as she presented it to the girl.

"We all want you to have it, my child—Angela, Sonia and I. It is only an imitation of the real shadow stone, but the workmanship is excellent and we thought for you it might have special significance."

"Oh, it has!"

Carol was reluctant to accept the gift, although often she had wished that she might possess the trinket for her very own. Finally, after considerable urging, she agreed to keep the handsome little piece and made a mental note that she would cherish it always.

When it was time to leave, Angela walked with her through the quiet courtyard to the street exit.

"I shall never forget all that I owe to you, Carol," she said earnestly as they stood at the door. "I can't half express it."

"But you have! The shadow stone is such a splendid gift and I'll always think of it as a symbol of

friendship. If only you weren't going back to New Haven—”

“But I'm not.”

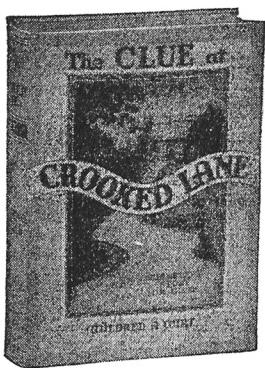
“You've decided to stay?” Carol asked eagerly.

“Yes, I'm to make my home with Sonia and Seenia,” Angela answered, her eyes shining. “So you see, we shall have many wonderful days together. I trust we'll become more than just good friends. I hope we shall be—what shall I say?”

“Chums!” Carol supplied.

“The very word,” Angela laughed. “Chums! Steadfast and true!”

THE END



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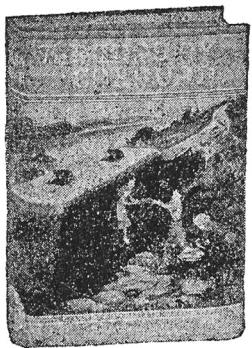
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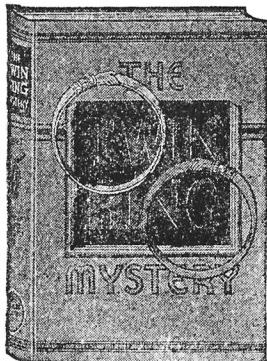
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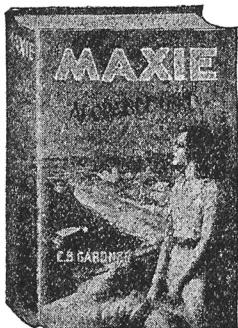
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